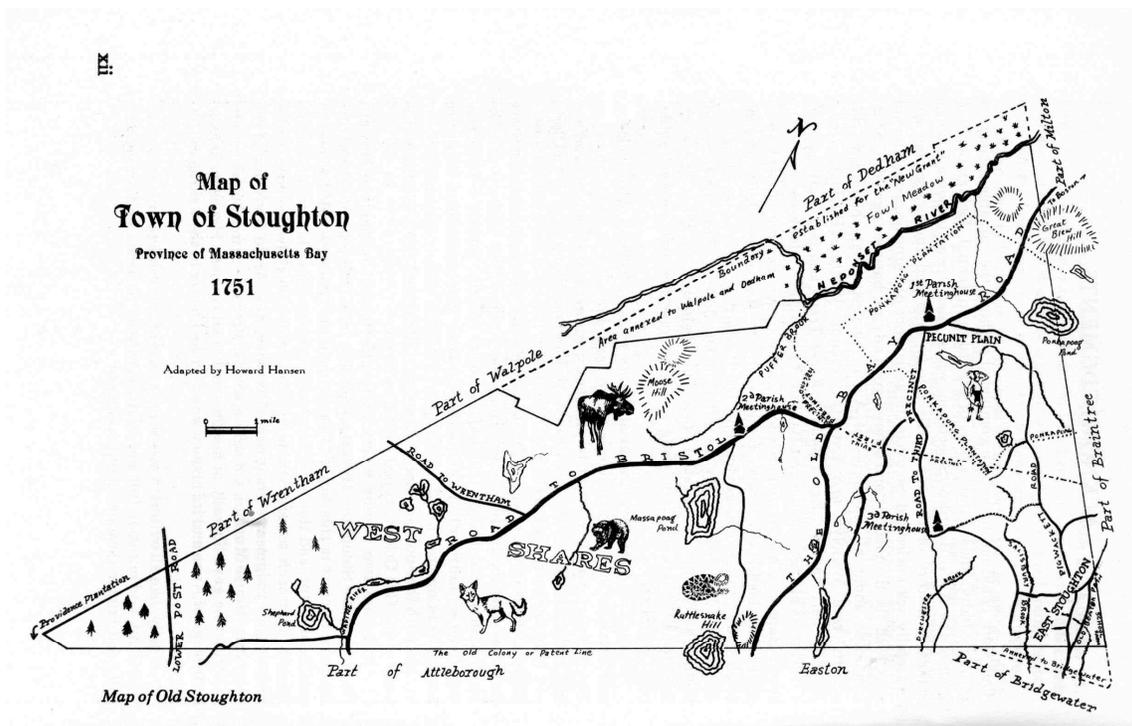


CHAPTER I

"...by the wayside leading from Braintree to Bridgewater"

AVON'S STORY begins deep in the forest of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, in the territory of the ancient town of Dorchester. In 1630 the Indian chief Chicataubut, in return for a sum of money, gave the English the right to settle Dorchester, south to the top of Blue Hill. After the chief's death, his brother Kitchamakin extended the boundary still farther southward, all the way to the Plymouth Colony line. This "New Grant," as it was called, gave the town of Dorchester title to over 40,000 acres, making it the largest town in New England.¹

In 1726 Dorchester's South Precinct, holding the present-day towns of Stoughton, Avon, Sharon, Canton and Foxborough, as well as parts of Wrentham (Plainville) and Dedham, was set aside and incorporated under the name Stoughton. Its neighbor to the east, also resting on the Plymouth Colony line, was the town of Braintree, which at that time included present day Quincy, Holbrook and Randolph.

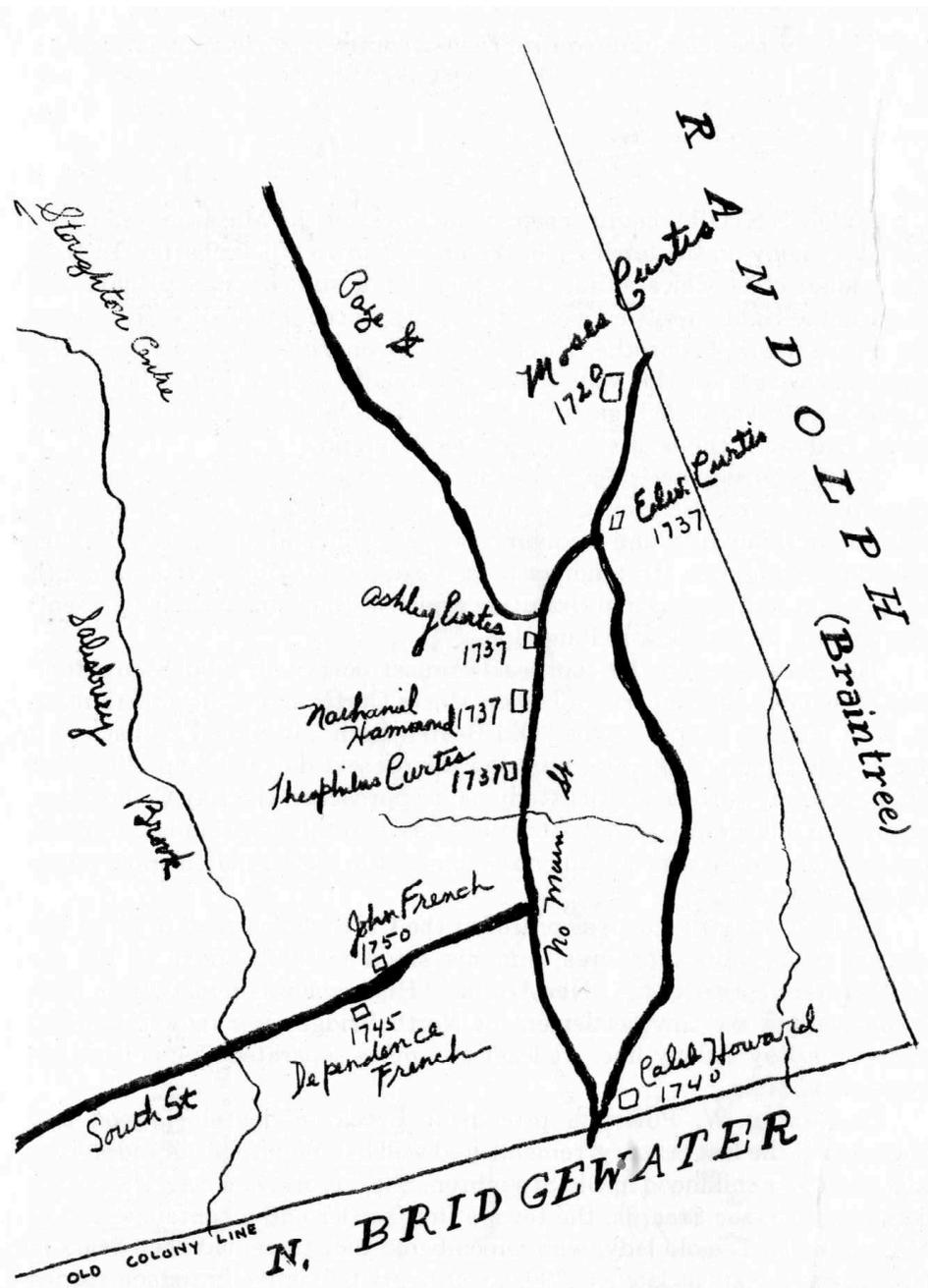


The road through the southeasternmost corner of "Old Stoughton" was little more than a cart trail when Moses Curtis arrived from Braintree in 1720. Known simply as the "Old Beaten Path", it arched its back in a southwesterly direction after crossing the present-day Randolph line, and then gradually turned southeasterly as it approached the Bay Colony line, about two miles away. What attracted Curtis to this location is unknown, but it is fair to say that he had chosen one of the most isolated spots possible for settlement.

By 1720 only five houses preceded the Curtis homestead in all of the present Stoughton-Avon area, and his stood virtually alone in the far southeastern corner of the "New Grant." ² His home was remote from both Braintree and the tiny settlement at North Bridgewater (now Brockton) across the Bay Colony line. At least two miles separated Curtis from his nearest neighbor.

Dr. Loring W. Puffer, a prominent Brockton dental surgeon and historian of the last century, remembered well listening to his grandmother talk about her childhood in Old Stoughton. She, in turn, had been the granddaughter of Isaac Steams, the town's first settler and a contemporary of Moses Curtis. The old lady, who remembered that there had been bears in New Grant forests as late as 1790, spent hours telling her grandson stories which had been told to her by Old Stoughton's first comers.

In April 1899 Dr. Puffer was asked to give an address at the dedication of a marker commemorating the location of Stearns' first house, and he called upon his grandmother's stories to help him convey the loneliness of the frontier. At night, he wrote, with pine knots and tallow candles providing the only light, "the howl of the wolf stimulated the steps of the belated traveler. The very crudest kind of flintlock gun guarded the home." Nevertheless, wrote Puffer, those first settlers - Steams, Curtis and the others - had chosen a bountiful country in which to build their homes. "The hill or moraines confronted [them] crowned by monster trees, two, four and six feet in diameter and more than one hundred feet high. What timber, plank and boards they suggested."³



Newton Talbot's 1749 map of East Stoughton
 — Courtesy Stoughton Historical Society

A blacksmith by trade, Moses Curtis offers an interesting example of the type of pioneer who settled New England in the eighteenth century. The father of eleven children - at least two of whom died young, he was 43 years old when he built his house on the westerly side of the Old Beaten Path. That first house in Avon still stands at

21 North Main Street.

Moses was the third generation of his family to find succor in the New England wilderness. His grandfather, Henry Curtis, had come from England aboard the ship Elizabeth and Ann in 1635 and settled in Marblehead. His father, Theophilus Curtis, moved to North Braintree (present day Quincy) and was apparently a large landowner in that area.⁴

Like several other early settlers of East Stoughton, Moses Curtis had come from Braintree, where he was a well known and respected citizen. In the ten years before emigrating he had held several important town offices, including surveyor, fence viewer, swine regulator, and constable.⁵ In 1720 he was seventeen years married; it is likely that at least eight of his children had been born in Braintree, and two died there. But what caused him to uproot his family and leave the town is unknown.

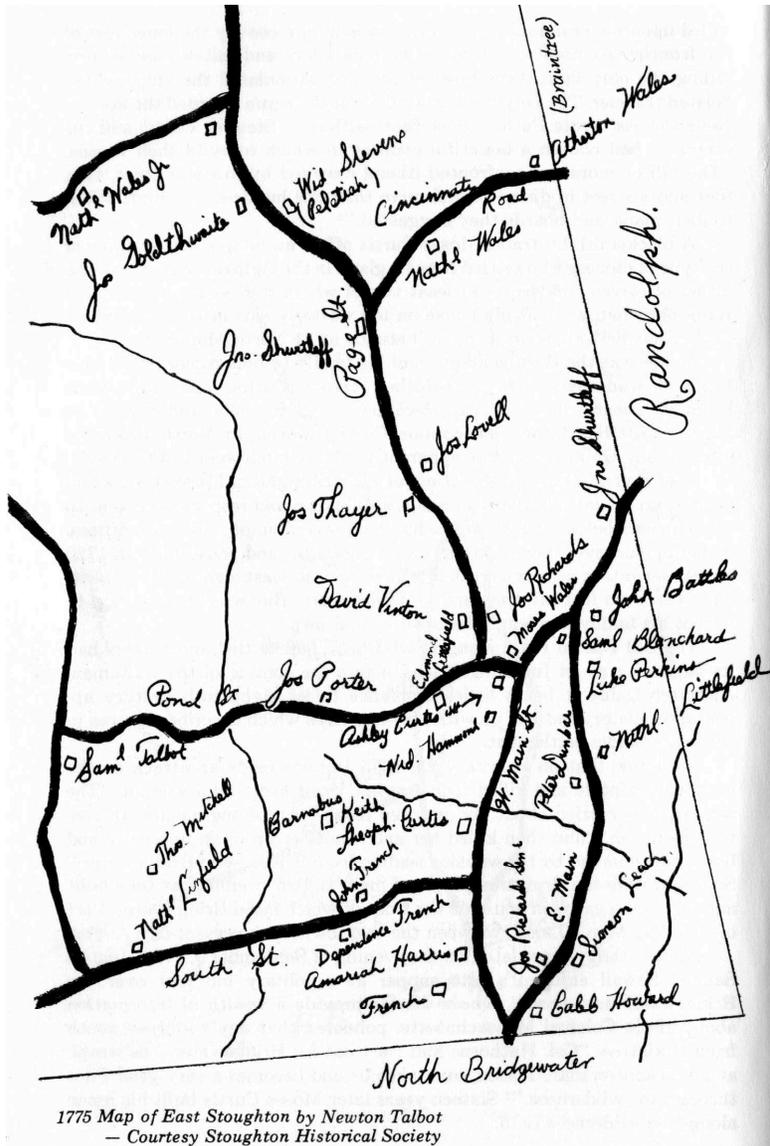
The Old Beaten Path, along which Curtis had settled, most likely had its beginning as an Indian trail long before the coming of the whiteman. Although today it bears little semblance to its eighteenth century appearance, history has left us with two vignettes which describe the area in the years before settlement.

We know that on February 25, 1675 Indians made an attack on the town of Braintree and killed four persons, three men and a woman. "The woman they carried about six or seven miles," wrote one nineteenth century historian, "and then killed her and hung her up in an unseemly and barbarous manner, by the wayside leading from Braintree to Bridgewater." So afraid were the Braintree people of more Indian trouble that they built and fortified a garrison house on the frontier which faced Bridgewater. Part of this "No Man's Land" between the two towns was present-day Avon.⁶

Almost thirty years later, on the evening of September 9, 1704, Justice Samuel Sewall enjoyed a late supper at a solitary inn just over the Bridgewater line. Sewall, whose diaries provide a wealth of information about life in Colonial Massachusetts, pondered that day's journey south from Braintree. "Col. Hathome and I set out for Bridgewater," he wrote, and a "Taunton man, Mason, overtakes us

and becomes a very good Pilot through the wilderness."7 Sixteen years later Moses Curtis built his home along this wilderness path.

The settlement at East Stoughton grew very slowly in the years after 1720, and indeed by 1775 there were just over thirty houses in the area.8 In order to understand the pattern of settlement, the reader should imagine a wishbone, skewed slightly to the right and closed at both ends. The left shank represents present-day West Main Street, Avon, an extension of the Old Beaten Path, laid out in 1737; the right shank represents East Main Street, properly laid out in 1763 and in the old days called simply the "Lower Road." The very top, where the shanks join, represents North Main Street.9



Moses Curtis' homestead stood alone at the top of the wishbone until 1737, when three of his sons decided to build their houses in his vicinity. Ashley and Theophilus Curtis build along the westerly side of West Main, just south of Page Street. Their homes stood on either side of a dwelling erected in the same year by Nathaniel Hammond. Likewise Edward, Moses' third son, built his home at the top of North Main Street, diagonally opposite from his father's house. These three Curtis boys had twenty-two children between them, so it's little wonder that East Stoughton was called Curtis' Corners by the mid-1740s.¹⁰

Toward the southerly end of the wishbone, Caleb Howard built a house in 1740 on the easterly side of East Main Street, and five years later Dependence French, another Braintree man, built on the southerly side of South Street. In 1750 his twin brother, John, built a house across the street. By mid-century, then, East Stoughton was the site of only eight houses."¹¹

Settlement started slowly and continued in that manner over the next twenty-five years, so that by the eve of the American Revolution East Stoughton was home to about thirty-three families. To continue with the wishbone analogy, over on the right shank John Battles and Samuel Blanchard built houses at the top of East Main Street, near its intersection with North Main. South of Blanchard settled Luke Perkins and Nathaniel Littlefield, with Peter Dunbar's house on the westerly side of the street, across from Littlefield. Farther south, closer to the Bridgewater line, Simeon Leach and Joseph Richards, Sr. built houses across from each other and just north of Caleb Howard, whose house was the oldest in the neighborhood.

In 1756 Jonathan Shurtleff built a home on North Main Street, just below the Randolph line, while farther south Moses Wales built on the northerly corner of West Main and Pond Streets. Almost two miles south a Brookline man, Amariah Harris, as well as an unidentified member of the French family settled on West Main, just north of the Bridgewater line.

The roads north and west of the wishbone saw more settlement in the years before the Revolution. South Street was still barely a cart trail when Nathaniel Linfield pushed west past the Frenches and built on

the northerly side of the road, not far from present-day Central Street. On Pond Street, Edmund Littlefield settled about 1757, and Joseph Porter built his home between 1763 and 1771. Still farther out, Samuel Talbot built his house on Central Street (near Pond St.) about 1772.

Page Street was one of East Stoughton's oldest trails, dating back at least to 1664 when it was called Pigwackett Road. Among its earliest settlers were David Vinton and Joseph Richards, who settled across from each other in 1756. Farther north came Joseph Thayer, James Lovell, Jonatha Shurtleff, Joseph Goldthwaite and William Nightingale.

The Cincinnati Road area, present-day Wales Avenue, is one of the most interesting spots in town. When the first house was built out there about 1756, the wagon path was simply referred to as "the road to Nathaniel Wales." It was later shortened to "Natties' Road" and this evolved into Cincinnati Road.¹²

In the 1890s antiquarians found traces of what was called "flourishing Indian settlement" in the vicinity of Cincinnati Road. In October 1890 two men were prosecuted for opening an Indian grave and removing two skeletons, one belonging to a child and the other to a full developed man. The child's bones were re-interred but the relic hunter was intent upon exhibiting the other skeleton until Judge Oscar Marden, of the Stoughton District Court, ordered the bones returned to the earth.¹³

Adding to the mysterious past of the area is the old Campbell campsite. Sometime in the early nineteenth century a family named Matrick built a homestead in the heavily forested swampland just south of Cincinnati Road [Wales Avenue]. The Matricks were either Indians or blacks, and legend persists that their place was a haven for runaway slaves. While it is unlikely that East Stoughton was a recognized "station" on the Underground Railroad, it is possible that fugitive slaves occasionally found comfort there.¹⁴

In any event, Cincinnati Road, now Wales Avenue, was first settled by Nathaniel and Atherton Wales about 1756. The street which today skirts the Avon Industrial Park as it proceeds easterly toward

the Randolph line is named for this early family.

By the eve of American independence, then, East Stoughton was viable, though sleepy, village of tradesmen and farmers. When old Moses Curtis died in 1763, at age 85, he left a closely knit community whose people were bound together by the common bonds of church or family."¹⁵

Even as they overcame the physical loneliness of the wilderness however, they were confronted with a rising sense of geographic a political isolation from their fellow townsmen over in Stoughton Centre.¹⁶ This problem would outlast those first settlers as well as their children and children's children. Although they attempted to address it early, this problem would find no satisfactory solution until just twelve years shy of our own century.

NOTES

1. Daniel T.V. Huntoon, *History of the Town of Canton* (Cambridge, Mass: John Wilson and Son, 1893), pp. 2-6.

2. Modern writers owe a debt of gratitude to Newton Talbot, the late second president of the Stoughton Historical Society. Using a surveyor's map which had been drawn in 1831, Talbot, who died in 1904, painstakingly researched the names and locations of the earliest settlers of Stoughton. He then drew maps of the town, including East Stoughton, as it would have looked in 1726, 1749, and 1775. These Talbot maps form the basis of the following discussion of the settlement patterns of East Stoughton. They are in the collection of the Stoughton Historical Society.

3. Loring W. Puffer Manuscript, April 19, 1899, Stoughton Historical Society.

4. Valuable genealogical information on the Curtises was compiled by the late Oliver Sheidow of Brockton. This material is now in the collection of the Avon Historical Society, Blanchard Museum House. It is hereinafter cited as Sheidow MSS.

5. Samuel A. Bates, *Records of the Town of Braintree, 1640 to 1793* (Randolph, Mass: Daniel H. Huxford, Printer, 1886), p. 67.

6. William S. Pattee, *A History of Old Braintree and Quincy, with a Sketch of Randolph and Holbrook* (Quincy: Green & Prescott, 1878), pp. 363-64.

7. M. Halsey Thomas, *The Diary of Samuel Sewall 1674-1729* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), I, 513. Both Sewall and his colleague Hathorne were judges who had presided over the Salem Witch Trials of 1692. In 1704 Sewall was a judge of the superior court whose work often had him on the road to one town or another.

8. Talbot Map, 1749.

9. The information on when streets were laid out comes from former Town Clerk John J. Collins, "Historical Sketch of the Town of Avon," *Fiftieth Anniversary of the town of Avon, Massachusetts, 1888-1938* (n.p.: n.p., 1938), n.p., hereinafter cited as Collins, 1938.

10. Sheidow MSS., Avon Historical Society.

11. Talbot Map, 1749. There is some uncertainty as to how long Edward and Theophilus Curtis occupied their East Stoughton houses. Although Theophilus appears on Talbot's 1775 map of East Stoughton homeowners, another historian has stated that both brothers must have moved across the line into North Bridgewater because their names appear on church records and they were instrumental in building that town's first meeting house in 1737. Bradford Kingman, *History of Brockton, Plymouth County, Massachusetts, 165 & 1894* (Syracuse: D. Mason & Co., Publishers, 1895), P. 57. While it seems that both brothers, as well as a number of other East Stoughton people, maintained close ties with North Bridgewater, it is not at all certain that they left East Stoughton to live elsewhere.

12. Another story has it that the name of the street was originally "Sister Nattie's Road," but this writer can find no documentary evidence to support this.

13. Avon Messenger, February 2, 1946; also a clipping from the Boston Herald dated October 29, 1892, and written by F.T. Walsh, Avon-Holbrook correspondent. Located in the William Lorch Scrapbooks, Avon Historical Society.
14. Lorch Scrapbooks, Avon Historical Society. Legend also has it that the runaway blacks in the Cincinnati Road area were helped by members of the North Stoughton Methodist Church, but church records are incomplete and no documentary evidence can be found to support this claim.
15. Moses Curtis died on May 10, 1763 and is buried in the Ashland Cemetery, Brockton, Mass.
16. The original Stoughton Centre was considered Pecunit Plain or Canton Corner, now the junction of Pleasant and Washington Streets, Canton. Reference here is to present-day Stoughton Centre, which became a separate precinct in 1743, though not identified as such until 1797, when Canton was incorporated, leaving the younger precinct with the original name.