

CHAPTER II

"We live on a Gore of Land ..."

IT APPEARS that almost from the beginning the people of East Stoughton were unhappy with their isolation from Old Stoughton Centre. They felt greater kinship with their neighbors in the north parish of Bridgewater, who incidentally suffered a similar remoteness from their own town center. In 1736, and again in 1737/38, the residents of North Bridgewater, citing the great distance over which they had to travel to worship, petitioned the House of Representatives to set them off from Bridgewater as a separate township. As part of their request they included "a small tract of Land & a few of ye Inhabitants of ye Town of Stoughton which suitably accomodates them as well as us ..." This was signed by fifty-five petitioners, including five "Stoten people": Nathaniel Hammond and Theophilus, William, Ashley and Edward Curtis.¹

The House subsequently ordered that the town officials of Bridgewater and Stoughton be sent copies of the petition so that if they objected they would show cause why the request should not be granted. Although Stoughton's reply to the petition has been lost to history, it is certain - judging from the fate of similar requests made in the future - that the town vehemently opposed the plan. The episode ended when North Bridgewater, with no mention of East Stoughton, was incorporated as a distinct precinct of Bridgewater. This allowed its residents to settle their own minister and thereby alleviate some of their hardship.²

The defeat of their plan did not deter the East Stoughton people from further attempts at separation. The issue simmered for more than a year. Then another communication was sent to town officials:

To the Select Men of Stoughton: The Humble Petition of us Subscribers that you would set us off to Bridgewater township: it is not Lickly that We Shall Ever Be accomodated with town preveledges with you as we may be with them. Their fore we pray you to Do to us as you would that others should Do to you in Such a Case. We Rest yours, Janewary 1740/41

*Edward Curtis
Theophilus Curtis
Nathaniel Hammond
Ashley Curtis³*

What action the petitioners expected from the selectmen is unclear, but this letter was the cause of intense bitterness the following summer. Perhaps the East Stoughton people thought that the letter was sufficient notification that they wanted an article of separation placed on the next town meeting warrant for the citizens of Stoughton to deliberate. The selectmen, however, drew no such inference and merely filed the letter, believing that they had no power to act in the matter.

The petitioners waited until July, 1741, and then sent a communication to the House of Representatives asking to be set off from Stoughton and annexed to the town of Bridgewater. First, they explained that the terrain which separated them from their townsmen presented a special hardship.

We live on a Gore of Land that Lys Between Bridgewater and Braintree but in the township of Stoughton . . . ware we are Deprived of any town prevelege by Reson of a Grate Sedar Swamp and other Swamps & a River & Hils of Rocks that Cut this Gore of Land that We Live on off from the towne of Stoughton. And if it were so that We could pass the nearest Way throw them Swamps & Hills it is seven mils: So that we are deprived of any Preveledg of the towne scoole and

all most Every preveledg that belongs to towne inhabitants.

Additionally, they wrote that they were required to fulfill civic responsibilities "which their isolation rendered almost impossible, and they hadn't the money to pay the penalites for declining to serve. *But they chuse us cunstables*, continued the petition, *and We are obliged to serve Because we are poore & cannot pay our fins and we are so littel aquainted in the town that We do not know half the People that we are to gather Raits from*

They concluded by explaining why they were taking the matter up with the House of Representatives:

*We further petitioned the Select Men of Stoughton to put it into their Warrant for their town meating to see if the town would set us off to Bridgewater township. But they did not notifi the town of our desire. Then we petitioned the towne of Bridgewater to see if they of this Honoured Cort would set us of to them and it was voted in the affirmative. The Land petitioned to be set of is about Nine Hundred Ackers.*⁴

As usual, the House of Representatives permitted the town of Stoughton an opportunity to state its objection to the petition. This time the selectmen were ready with a scathing rebuttal which took issue with every assertion made by the East Stoughton people. *In the first place*, charged the selectmen, *... they say they live in a Gore of Land, etc. To which we say, that the corner where they live is the most square & Regular corner that there is in said Town of Stoughton. But if under ye Specious pretence of a Gore, their petition should be granted according to the bounds of the new precinct in which they Live, it would carry off a very valuable & Regular piece of Land of twice ye number of acres (set forth in their petition) to an ancient. Large & wealty Town [Bridgewater] that hath no need thereof and leaves that part of Stoughton very deformed, making three corners, where now*

there is but one....

The selectmen also protested that granting the petition would put Stoughton's "school farm" not only in another town, but also in another county. This would make impossible to prosecute trespassers, and, they charged, *we have very good reason to conclude that said petitioners design to make what advantage they can for such an inconveniency, because that several of them ... have been trespassing on said school farm*

And as for hills of rocks, swamps & river, etc., wrote the selectmen, we conceive it to be but an empty sound to amuse said Honorable Court for some of ourselves are Knowing the said way which is commonly used and know it to be passable & no river in all the way, nor but very small Brooks that are commonly dry in summer. And what they mean by its being Seven miles the nearest way through hills, swamps, etc., we know not, and they are not so honorable as to tell; but if they mean from ye school which they complain for want of priviledge of, we crave leave to enform that the Town past a vote that it should, accordingly it was, kept, within about three miles from said farthest of the petitioners the last year and it is no uncommon thing in Stoughton to go three miles to school.

The next point taken up was East Stoughton's complaint that its residents were forced to assume public office in spite of their great distance from the center of town. In fact, replied the selectmen, only one man from that section - Edward Curtis - had ever been chosen constable, and then only becuase "according to his circumstances, it appeared to ye town that it was fairly his turn."

Concerning East Stoughton's criticism of the selectmen for not bringing their request for separation before a town meeting, they replied that the communication received from the petitioners in January made no mention that this was what they wanted. When the East Stoughton

people failed to appear at the selectmen's meeting, even after being properly notified, "we received it [the petition] as a flout rather than a request." But now, they said, they recognized the January letter for what it was, "a cheat," because the petitioners never really wanted the townspeople to act on the request. They hoped instead to appear before the House as an aggrieved party.⁵

In a separately filed memorandum the selectmen reviewed Stoughton's brief history, beginning with its incorporation in 1727. Since that time, they stated, the town had done its best to fulfill its responsibilities, but repeated requests from various sections to be set off "perplexed" them, and made it appear that Stoughton had been incorporated only "to enlarge & enrich other towns, that are vastly richer than we."⁶

Although the House dismissed the petition on July 31, 1741, the issue was still kept alive. Four months later the East Stoughton people submitted an amended petition reducing the amount of Stoughton territory which would be lost to Bridgewater. They now asked that only their own estates be transferred, not the entire section of town.

The selectmen remained adamantly opposed to any boundary change and claimed that the new plan would only make matters worse. They told the House that "this last petition for themselves & estates cuts that part of ye town full of holes and makes it [a] sceliton [skeleton]"⁷

On December 18, 1741, in an effort to improve relations with the petitioners, as well as perhaps show the House of Representatives that the town was willing to make concessions, the selectmen announced that the road to East Stoughton would be improved. Eleven property owners along the way were willing to grant easements so that the trail could be made more passable for horses and carts.⁸ The road to be improved was most likely present-day Page Street.

Despite this gesture, the people of East Stoughton remained unhappy

with the situation and, perhaps recognizing that their latest petition was about to go down to defeat, summarized their position for the House. They wanted to be set off, they said, because they lived seven miles "from the standing part of Stoughton." The road connecting them was rocky, hilly and swampy, and they were not able to pay their share to improve it. Furthermore, they lived four miles from any other inhabitant of Stoughton. "We can have no conversation with them without grate Difficulty," they wrote, "and to attend publick worship, military dutys and other publick dutys we are not able to do"⁹

Their petition was again denied, but this did not end the controversy. Between 1743 and 1770 at least three more attempts were made to have the village set off from Stoughton.¹⁰ Each attempt failed, and by the time of the last petition necessity would force both groups to put aside their differences in order to meet the crisis brought on by the American Revolution.

NOTES

1. Massachusetts State Archives, Microfilm, Vol. 114, pp. 212-12; 203-04; hereinafter cited as Mass. State Archives.
2. Nahum Mitchell, *History of the Early Settlement of Bridgewater, in Plymouth County, Massachusetts* (Boston: Kidder & Wright, 1840), pp. 48-49; 67.
3. Mass. State Archives, Microfilm, Vol. 114, p. 628.
4. Mass. State Archives, Microfilm, Vol. 114, pp. 622-23.
5. The selectmen's reply, dated July 29. 1741, is found in Mass. State Archives, Microfilm, Vol. 114, pp. 625-26. The "school farm" was ninety acres of unimproved land near the Bridgewater line. The proceeds from the sale of this land as house lots were allocated toward

the upkeep of Stoughton's public schools.

6. Mass. State Archives, Microfilm, Vol. 114, p. 627.

7. The amended petition is found in Mass. State Archives, Microfilm, Vol. 114, pp. 632-33; the town's response is found in the same volume, pp. 637-38.

8. Mass. State Archives, Microfilm, Vol. 114, pp. 634; 540.

9. Mass. State Archives, Microfilm, Vol. 114, p. 641.

10. *Journals of the House of Representatives* (Boston: The Massachusetts Historical Society, 1946-1985), Vol. 21, pp. 116, 135; Vol. 29, p. 161; Vol. 47, p. 177; hereinafter cited as *House Journals*. In all but one petition the East Stoughton people asked to be set off to North Bridgewater. In 1762, however, the House agreed: "That the Petitioners, Atherton Wales, Nathaniel Wales, David Vinton, Moses Wales, Thomas Penniman, Joseph Lovel, and Nehemiah Blanchard, they and their Estates be and shall be annexed to the third Precinct in Braintree, to do Duty and receive Priviledge there, two Years from this Time, except this Court are fully certified within two Years, that the before mentioned Town-Way is well and sufficiently Repaired, and made feasible and convenient for travelling with Horses..." *House Journals, 1762-1763*, Vol. 39, p. 161.