

THE SITE  
OF  
THE WESSAGUSSET SETTLEMENT OF 1622  
AT  
WEYMOUTH, MASSACHUSETTS.

BY  
CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS.

[REPRINTED FROM THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY, NOVEMBER, 1891.]

CAMBRIDGE:  
JOHN WILSON AND SON.  
*University Press.*  
1891.



---

**THE SITE**  
**OF**  
**THE WESSAGUSSET SETTLEMENT OF 1622**  
**AT**  
**WEYMOUTH, MASSACHUSETTS.**

**BY**  
**CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS.**

---



## THE WESSAGUSSET SETTLEMENT OF 1622.

---

NEARLY twenty years ago I was invited to deliver an address upon the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the settlement of the town of Weymouth. In preparing that address I made an effort to locate the site of Weston's settlement, but was able to get no further indication of it than is contained in the following extract from Russell's "Guide to Plymouth":—

"A correspondent in Quincy thus describes the place: 'It is about three miles southeast of the granite church in Quincy, at a place locally called Old Spain.' Weston's colony sailed up Fore River, which separates Quincy from Weymouth, and then entered Phillips Creek, and commenced operations on its north bank" (p. 106, note).

It seemed to be well established that the site of Weston's settlement was in that part of Weymouth now locally known as "Old Spain"; though no one has ever yet been able to suggest even a plausible theory why it is called "Old Spain." It will be remembered that when Governor Winthrop in 1632 paid his first visit to Plymouth, he started from Boston on what is now the 4th of November, taking with him John Wilson, the pastor of the church, and others, and, going on board the "Lion," was carried by the captain of that ship in a boat to Wessagusset. There they passed the night, and "the next morning . . . the Governor and his company went on foot to Plimouth, and came thither within the evening." This was Friday; remaining at Plymouth until the following Wednesday, "about five in the morning the Governor and his company came out of Plimouth; the Governor of Plimouth, with the pastor and

elder, etc., accompanying them near half a mile out of town in the dark"; and they "came that evening to Wessagusset, where they were bountifully entertained as before with more turkeys, geese, ducks, etc., and the next day came safe to Boston."<sup>1</sup>

The point here to be emphasized is Winthrop's double visit to Wessagusset in November, 1632, and his stay there both going to and coming from Plymouth. He was more or less familiar with the locality, and knew exactly where to place the settlement on a map of the coast, especially how it lay as regarded the harbor and the approaches to it.

Wood, in his "New England's Prospect,"<sup>2</sup> says of Wessagusset in 1633:—

"This as yet is but a small village; yet it is very pleasant and healthful, very good ground, and is well timbered, and hath good store of hay-ground. It hath a very spacious harbour for shipping before the town, the salt water being navigable for boats and pinnaces two leagues. Here the inhabitants have good store of fish of all sorts, and swine, having acorns and clams at the time of year. Here is likewise an alewife river."

There is accordingly no doubt whatever that Weymouth was the oldest settled place in the original colony of Massachusetts Bay; and, next to Plymouth, is the oldest settled place in what is now the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Originally selected about the middle of May, 1622, for the site of a plantation by those sent out by Thomas Weston, it was occupied by Weston's company in the following August. Early in April, 1623, those composing the plantation having in the course of the winter fallen into great straits, Miles Standish went to their assistance from Plymouth, and there on the 6th of the month, according to the revised calendar, had his bloody fight with the Indians, resulting in the killing of Pecksuot and Wituwamut. Wessagusset was then wholly abandoned; but "the pale and houses," to use the expression in Winslow's "Good Newes"<sup>3</sup> had not been destroyed by the savages, and they were occupied by Capt. Robert Gorges

<sup>1</sup> Savage's Winthrop, i. \*92, \*93.

<sup>2</sup> Young's Chronicles of Massachusetts, pp. 394, 395.

<sup>3</sup> Young's Chronicles of Pilgrims, p. 344.

and his party about the middle of the following September.<sup>1</sup> Since then the place has never been wholly abandoned; and the first permanent and continuous settlement on the shores of Boston Bay dates, therefore, from the landing of Robert Gorges' party at Wessagusset, or Weymouth, in September, 1623. This whole subject, it may be remembered, I discussed in a paper read before this Society thirteen years ago, printed in Volume XVI. of the Proceedings (pp. 194–206), and again in another paper in the "Memorial History of Boston" (vol. i. chap. iii.). Wessagusset, therefore, is a place the exact locality of which it is desirable should be fixed.

A short time ago I for the first time carefully examined a copy of Winthrop's original map, of 1634, of Massachusetts Bay, found by Mr. Henry F. Waters in England. I noticed on this map that Wessagusset was located by Governor Winthrop not upon Phillips Creek, or at the place which tradition has always indicated, but farther north, and at a point much more naturally adapted to the purposes of a pioneer trading-station. I have never felt satisfied that the traditional site on

<sup>1</sup> Referring to a similar statement heretofore made, Nash in a note to his "History of Weymouth" remarks (p. 22): "Mr. Adams says about the middle of September. In Sir Fernando Gorges' description of New England [Briefe Narration, p. 33; Baxter's Gorges, vol. ii. p. 50], he says, 'my son arrived [at Wessaguscus] about the beginning of August.'"

Bradford is the authority for the date given. He says (History, p. 148): "About the middle of September arrived Captaine Robert Gorges in the Bay of the Massachusetts." Bradford is on this point a much more reliable authority than Sir Ferdinando Gorges; for not only was he on the ground, but he was at once notified by Robert Gorges by letter of the arrival of the latter, who immediately afterwards visited Plymouth. Bradford also made his record at the time, and is always to be relied on as an authority. Sir Ferdinando Gorges, on the contrary, was not only at a distance, but he wrote at least fourteen years after the event; and the statements on many points of detail in the "Briefe Narration" are made from memory and are unreliable. Adams's Three Episodes, p. 23, note; Baxter's Memoir of Gorges, p. 104, note.

In the present case, moreover, there can be no doubt that Bradford was right, and Gorges wrong. The Records of the Council for New England show that the vessel in which Robert Gorges sailed was not ready for sea at the end of June (Proceedings of American Antiquarian Society, April, 1867, and October, 1875); and Bradford's narrative of events immediately subsequent to Robert Gorges' arrival shows that all those events took place in October and early November.

Sir Ferdinando Gorges, writing many years afterwards, seems to have given the time of his son's departure from England for that of his arrival in Massachusetts Bay, where he probably landed somewhere between the 23d and 27th of September, 1623, according to the calendar now in use.

the north side of Phillips Creek was the correct one. Repeated and careful examination of the ground disclosed no possible reason for there placing such a station. The site does not look toward the sea, commanding the entrance to the harbor; neither is there good anchorage in front of it, as Wood says there was before Wessagusset; nor is it readily accessible. The site indicated on Winthrop's map struck me at once as being far more natural.

As I wished to fix the probable true site with as much confidence as possible, I invited Mr. Henry W. Haynes, of the Society, and Mr. Thomas F. Cleverly, a resident of "Old Spain," who has given much attention to matters connected with its local history, to visit the ground with me. We went there, accordingly, on the 18th of October, taking a copy of Winthrop's map with us.

I shall ask to have that portion of the map which includes the Wessagusset site and its immediate vicinity reproduced in connection with this paper. I will merely add that, considering how freely this map is drawn, and how much of what is on it is merely roughly indicated, it will be found in all essential respects, when examined on the spot, singularly accurate. For instance, not only the outline of the coast, but all the rivers and creeks are so correctly set down as to be recognized at once. The site of Thomas Morton's Merrymount, subsequently Mount Wollaston, can be placed as lying between what was known as the Mount Wollaston River and the Quincy River. So also the stream running down from what is now known as Braintree Neck; and also the Weymouth Fore River and the Weymouth Back River. The exact position of the present bridge connecting Quincy Point with "Old Spain" can be seen, as also the outline of the tidal basin south of it. An examination of the map shows that Governor Winthrop, who had been there personally, located the Wessagusset settlement nearly opposite the mouth of the Quincy River, and a little if anything north of it. Phillips Creek, on the other hand, also on the opposite shore, is actually a considerable distance above the mouth of the Quincy River, and quite concealed from it. A purely tidal inlet, it is not indicated on the map. There is now no anchorage ground near it; and in this most important respect it fails to agree with Wood's



NORTH



SECTION OF "THE WATERS-WINTHROP MAP".



description, — “a very spacious harbor for shipping before the town.”

Going on the 18th of October to the site of the Wessagusset plantation, according to Winthrop's map, it was at once obvious to us that this locality was the one which naturally would have been selected for the purposes of a pioneer trading-station. Not only was there good anchorage, as Wood says, in front of it and within a reasonable distance of the shore, but the place commands a clear and unbroken view of the entrance to the harbor through what is now known as “Hull Gut,” or the passage between Hull and Peddock's Island. Had the site north of Phillips Creek been selected, it would have been impossible to get from it any view of the harbor, while it is obvious that for those seeking to establish a trading-post, — the sole object which Weston's people had in view, — an unobstructed view of the harbor's mouth was a matter of the first importance. The locality indicated by Winthrop was also well adapted for plantation purposes, inasmuch as the ground is level, the ascent from the beach not too abrupt, and fresh water must have been easily obtainable in the immediate vicinity.

Winthrop, it will be observed, places Wessagusset upon the north side of the cove, or indenture of the shore, opposite the mouth of the Quincy River. This cove is unmistakably that now called King's Cove, formerly known as Hunt's Hill Cove. The point to the north of it, directly opposite the mouth of the Quincy River, has always been known as Hunt's Hill Point. Nash, in his sketch of Weymouth (p. 152), says that —

“In the early part of the eighteenth century a company was formed by a number of the prominent men of the town for the purpose of carrying on ‘a fishing trade to Cape Sables,’ and the town granted to it the use of ‘so much of Hunt's Hill, with the lowland and beach adjoining at the mouth of Fore River, as may be necessary for the purpose.’ As far as the record shows, this was the first joint stock company formed in the town. Of its history but little is known.”

Further on (p. 155), he adds that, in 1876, —

“N. Porter Keene commenced the construction of vessels in Old Spain, near Hunt's Hill; and since that time he has built eleven ves-

sels, sail and steam, averaging a cost of about \$40,000 each. There is on the stocks at present [that is, in 1884] a large vessel intended for a four-masted schooner (since launched)."

The shipyard referred to by Mr. Nash was abandoned a few years since; and no traces of it now remain, with the exception of a two-story storehouse or workshop, which not impossibly may stand close to the site originally occupied by Weston's block house. In all the early records of the town this spot is included in what is known as "the Plain."

It is matter of regret that Hunt's Hill, a glacial deposit immediately north of King's Cove, is being removed to supply material for the filling of the water park of the city of Boston now in course of construction near Castle Island. This hill apparently lay immediately south of the site of the Wessagusset settlement, and between it and King's Cove, the settlement at the foot of it looking off toward the north. As our investigations seemed to indicate that there can be little if any doubt as to where the original settlement was made and "the pale and houses" stood, it is also matter for regret that the ground in the immediate neighborhood should not be preserved and set aside for public uses, with a proper memorial placed upon it. In view of the fact that here was the first settlement within the original colony of Massachusetts Bay; that here was the spot on which Miles Standish had his momentous conflict with the savages, which settled for half a century the question of European ascendancy in Massachusetts; and here also was the point at which the famous Wessagusset hanging, which Butler made such use of in his poem of "Hudibras" did *not* occur,—all combining to make of it a point of interest second to hardly any other this side of Plymouth,—the Legislature of the Commonwealth not impossibly, and the town of Weymouth very probably, might, if the facts were now brought to their notice, be induced to take some action to preserve it; but in any event the subject is one which merits the attention of this Society.

Mr. HENRY W. HAYNES said : —

Whoever carefully examines the traditional site assigned to ancient Wessagusset, upon the elevated plateau north of Phillips Creek, will scarcely fail to have grave doubts arise in

his mind in regard to its correctness. None of the essential requisites for the location of a settlement in a wilderness can be found upon that wind-swept, shelterless height, where no source of supply of drinking-water, either from springs or brooks, can be found within any convenient distance. When, besides these *prima facie* objections, one sees that this spot possesses no suitableness for a trading-post, either of outlook or of anchorage, and that there is not the slightest indication visible that it was ever occupied by man as a place of habitation, he can scarcely help feeling that the site must be sought for elsewhere.

With these convictions, the evidence afforded by Governor Winthrop's map lends striking confirmation to the complete adaptedness for the early settlement which Mr. Adams and myself found the locality to possess which we have recently studied at what is now known as King's Cove. Here we saw just "the lay of the land" which would naturally attract settlers searching for a home in a new country, rising with a gentle slope from a curving beach, in a broad level outstretch of deep soil, well open to the sun upon the east, but sheltered in other directions by higher ground, and having an ample supply of springs of water. Moreover, it was clear, as Mr. Adams has well explained, that this spot possessed all the advantages for a trading-post, which the other lacks.

I feel convinced, accordingly, that tradition has been somewhat at fault in regard to the ancient locality, and that it is here at King's Cove that we must really place the site of Wessagusset, the oldest settlement within the original limits of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

