

**THE FIRST OFFICIAL
FRONTIER OF THE
MASSACHUSETTS BAY;
VOL. XVII, PP.250-271**

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The First Official Frontier of the Massachusetts Bay; Vol. XVII, pp.250-271 by Frederick Jackson Turner

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This paper is an enquiry into the first officially designated frontier in Massachusetts from the point of view of a student of Western history, interested in the advance of the frontier of settlement during the whole period of American history, and from the Atlantic coast across the continent. It is an attempt at correlation and interpretation of more or less familiar data, rather than an attempt to fix the date of the frontier line by the discovery of hitherto unknown material.

In a previous paper on the Significance of the Frontier in American History,¹ I took for my text the following announcement of the Superintendent of the Census of 1890:

Up to and including 1880 the country had a frontier of settlement but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, the westward movement, etc., it cannot therefore any longer have a place in the census reports.

Two centuries prior to this announcement, in 1690, a committee of the General Court of Massachusetts recommended the Court to order what shall be the frontier and to maintain a committee to settle garrisons on the frontier with forty soldiers to each frontier town as main guard.² In the two hundred years between this official attempt to locate the Massachusetts frontier line, and the official announcement of the ending of the national frontier line, westward expansion was the most important single process in American history.

The designation "frontier town" was not, however, a new one. As early as 1645 inhabitants of Concord, Sudbury, and Dedham, "being inland townes & but thinly peopled," were forbidden to remove without authority;³ in 1669, certain towns had been the subject of legislation as "frontier townes;"⁴ and in the period of King

¹ Report of the American Historical Association for 1893, p. 199.

² Massachusetts Archives, xxxvi. 150.

³ Massachusetts Colony Records, ii. 122.

⁴ *Ibid.* vol. iv. pt. ii. p. 439; Massachusetts Archives, cvii. 160-161.

Philip's War there were various enactments regarding frontier towns.¹ In the session of 1675-6 it had been proposed to build a fence of stockades or stone eight feet high from the Charles "where it is navigable" to the Concord at Billerica and thence to the Merrimac and down that river to the Bay, "by which means that whole tract will [be] environed, for the security & safty (vnder God) of the people, their houses, goods & cattel; from the rage & fury of the enemy."² This project, however, of a kind of Roman Wall did not appeal to the frontiersmen of the time. It was a part of the antiquated ideas of defence which had been illustrated by the impossible equipment of the heavily armored soldier of the early Puritan régime whose corslets and head pieces, pikes, matchlocks, fourquettes and bando-leers, went out of use about the period of King Philip's War. The fifty-seven postures provided in the approved manual of arms for loading and firing the matchlock proved too great a handicap in the chase of the nimble savage. In this era the frontier fighter adapted himself to a more open order and lighter equipment suggested by the Indian warrior's practice.³

The settler on the outskirts of Puritan civilization took up the task of bearing the brunt of attack and pushing forward the line of advance which year after year carried American settlement into the wilderness. In American thought and speech the term "frontier" has come to mean the edge of settlement, rather than, as in Europe, the military boundary. By 1690 it was already evident that the frontier of settlement and the frontier of military defence were coinciding. As population advanced into the wilderness and thus successively brought new exposed areas between the settlements on the one side and the Indians with their European backers on the other, the military frontier ceased to be thought of as the Atlantic coast, but rather as a moving line bounding the un-won wilderness. It could not be a fortified boundary along the charter limits, for those limits extended to the South Sea, and conflicted with the bounds of sister colonies. The thing to be defended was the outer edge of this

¹ See, for example, Massachusetts Colony Records, v. 79; Green, Groton during the Indian Wars, p. 39; L. K. Mathews, Expansion of New England, p. 58.

² Massachusetts Archives, lxxviii. 174-176.

³ Osgood, American Colonies in the Seventeenth Century, i. 501, and citations: cf. Publications of this Society, xii. 38-39.

expanding society, a changing frontier, one that needed designation and re-statement with the changing location of the "West."

It will help to illustrate the significance of this new frontier if we recall that Virginia at the same time as Massachusetts underwent a similar change and attempted to establish frontier towns, or "co-habitations," at the heads (that is the first falls, the vicinity of Richmond, Petersburg, etc.), of her rivers. After experimenting with *quasi* manorial grants to frontier commanders, like Abraham Wood, Robert Beverley, and William Byrd, for establishing forts on this frontier, and after providing a system of mounted rangers in 1691 to patrol the frontier along the fall line, Virginia enacted a statute¹ in 1701 for settling co-habitations (i. e. towns) upon the frontiers by the inducements of land grants and exemption from taxes to "societies of men." These lands were to be held in common and the power of managing the land lay in the society. Half-acre houselots and two-hundred-acre farms were to be granted to individuals. The Virginia system of "particular plantations" introduced along the James at the close of the London Company's activity had furnished a type for the New England town. In recompense, at this later day the New England town may have furnished a model for Virginia's efforts to create by legislation frontier settlements. This notable statute further provided that a "warlike Christian man," for every five hundred acres granted was required to keep his continual abode within the palisaded military town, equipped with musket or fuzee, pistol, scimitar, and tomahawk. Such a combination of the mediæval soldier with the Indian shows that Americanization at the frontier was in progress in Virginia as well as in New England.

An act of March 12, 1694-5, by the General Court of Massachusetts enumerated the "Frontier Towns" which the inhabitants were forbidden to desert on pain of loss of their lands (if landholders) or of imprisonment (if not landholders), unless permission to remove were first obtained.² These eleven frontier towns included Wells, York, and Kittery on the eastern frontier, and Amesbury, Haverhill,

¹ Hening, *Statutes at Large*, iii. 204: cf. 1 Massachusetts Historical Collections, v. 129, for influence of the example of the New England town. On Virginia frontier conditions see Alvord and Bidgood, *First Explorations of the Trans-Allegheny Region*, pp. 23-34, 93-95. P. A. Bruce, *Institutional History of Virginia*, ii. 97, discusses frontier defence in the seventeenth century.

² Massachusetts Archives, lxx. 240; Massachusetts Province Laws, i. 194, 293.

Dunstable, Chelmsford, Groton, Lancaster, Marlborough,¹ and Deerfield. In March, 1699-1700, the law was re-enacted with the addition of Brookfield, Mendon, and Woodstock, together with seven others, Salisbury, Andover,² Billerica, Hatfield, Hadley, Westfield, and Northampton, which, "tho' they be not frontiers as those towns first named, yet lye more open than many others to an attack of an Enemy."³

In the spring of 1704 the General Court of Connecticut, following closely the act of Massachusetts, named as her frontier towns, not to be deserted, Symsbury, Waterbury, Danbury, Colchester, Windham, Mansfield, and Plainfield.

Thus about the close of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century there was an officially designated frontier line for New England. The line passing through these enumerated towns represents: (1) the outskirts of settlement along the eastern coast and up the Merrimac and its tributaries, — a region threatened by the Indian country by way of the Winnepesaukee Lake route; (2) the end of the ribbon of settlement up the Connecticut Valley, menaced by the Canadian Indians by way of the Lake Champlain and Winooski River route to the Connecticut; (3) boundary towns which marked the edges of that inferior agricultural region, where the hard crystalline rocks furnished a later foundation for Shays's Rebellion, opposition to the adoption of the Federal Constitution,

¹ In a petition (read March 3, 1692-3) of settlers "in Sundry Farms granted in those Remote Lands Scituate and Lyeing between Sudbury, Concord, Marlbury, Natick and Sherburne & Westerly is the Wilderness," the petitioners ask easement of taxes and extension into the Natick region in order to have means to provide for the worship of God, and say:

Wee are not Ignorant that by reason of the present Distressed Condition of those that dwell in these Frontier Towns, divers are meditating to remove themselves into such places where they have not hitherto been concerned in the present Warr and desolation thereby made, as also that thereby they may be freed from that great burthen of public taxes necessarily accruing thereby, Some haveing already removed themselves. Butt knowing for our parts that wee cannot run from the hand of a Jealous God, doe account it our duty to take such Measures as may inable us to the performance of that duty wee owe to God, the King, & our Families (Massachusetts Archives, cxiii. 1).

² In a petition of 1658 Andover speaks of itself as "a remote upland plantation" (Massachusetts Archives, cxii. 99).

³ Massachusetts Province Laws, i. 402.