

## Easton Center

The Devil came to Easton Center sometime in the colonial period, and there is no evidence that he ever left. In fact, the contentious religious and political history of the Center seems to show he stayed at least two hundred years!

The Devil's visit began in the Hockomock Swamp where he picked up stones and stored them in the leather apron commonly worn by farmers and craftsmen in colonial times. He then moved two miles to the north and hopped around a field whose location is now lost. This Hop Field was ever barren after the Devil's visit. His next stop was the Center where while taking a large step from one rock to another his apron strings broke and all the rocks he carried fell to the ground. The cloven hoof marks on stones at opposite sides of the field are evidence of his visit. After that, the legend tells no more about the Devil in Easton.

What does one make of this story that was so old in Chaffin's time (1886) that no one remembered when it was first told? At first, it appears to be a simple legend to explain geological features like a seemingly bottomless swamp, a barren patch, and a particularly rocky field. Anyone wishing to see what many fields in Easton Center looked like when the first settlers arrived can glance into the rocky yard at 6 Purchase Street. The Devil's Footprints also still exist on private property off Porter Street. They are a geological phenomenon caused by differential weathering of the 295 million year old sedimentary bedrock. Many stones in the neighborhood show similar, if less distinctive, footprints.

Yet there must be a deeper psychological meaning to the legend because Chaffin remarked that in the early Nineteenth Century boys' driving cattle by the Devil's Field at dusk pushed their cows along at a breakneck pace to avoid Old Scratch. From the vague hints about the origin of the legend, we can guess it began around 1750 just at the time the town was nearly riven in two by a controversy about moving the meeting house to the Center. The legend of the Devil's Footprint probably reflects the anti-Center feeling aroused at that time

The Center's only natural resource, its location at the center of everything, was ignored by the earliest European settlers in town. The slow trickle of Black Brook didn't offer much hope for water power and the rocks, with or without the Devil, as well as some low swampy areas were not particularly attractive. Still, by 1716, what became Depot Street in the Center is mentioned in records. It apparently extended as a cart path as far as Black Brook. In 1723 Benjamin Drake, Jr. became the first settler in the neighborhood when he married and moved from his father's home on Church Street. His new home was on the west side of what would become Center Street north of the Civil War Monument. A year later, in June 1724, the Town awarded him five shillings for killing a wildcat. Whether this was an ancestor of the "Big Cat" of 1993 is unknown, but five shillings seem to be a high reward for killing a bobcat, so perhaps it was the legendary and mysterious cougar who once did and may still haunt the swamps of the area.

As the neighborhoods around Bay Road and North Easton began to grow, the road network through Easton Center developed. The section of Depot Street from Black Brook to the Five Corners (at Shaws) was officially laid out in 1752. The first section of Center Street to be laid out was a short piece connecting Summer and Short Streets (named for

Reverend Matthew Short) in 1738. The Town extended the road north and south in 1752 naming it Meeting-house Road. The northern part of the road was originally west of the present one. It began at the hill in front of the Ames Memorial Hall, followed Lincoln Street to Day Street and then followed Day and Sheridan Streets before finally curving back to the current route at the junction with Summer Street.

The present Center Street north from Summer Street was created in 1828 through the efforts of old Oliver Ames. Ames truly enjoyed being in charge of our highways, and he was no mere supervisor. For the Center Street job Mr. Ames, probably with his characteristic red bandana around his neck,

joked his splendid oxen to a plough, hitched another pair in front of them with someone to drive them, while he held down the plough beam in order to keep the ploughshare deep in the earth as they broke it up for the road. Thomas Williams held the handles of the plough and guided it. The plough broke under the great strain, and Mr. Ames at once harnessed up and drove out to Tisdale Harlow's [in Poquanticut], borrowing an excellent plough which Mr. Harlow owned and the work continued. It is interesting to think of him exerting himself more than an ordinary working man as he holds down the plough beam through the then long working day..

On this occasion Martin Wild was working with a yoke of oxen and a tip cart moving the earth and gravel. The oxen were inferior, far below the standard of the Ames oxen. Mr. Wild had great difficulty in backing them. As he tried and tried with poor success, Mr. Ames looked on with increasing disgust and finally exclaimed "You might as well try to back up Hell itself as those oxen."

As families moved north and west from the original settlement at South Easton Green (junction of Depot Street and Route 138) in the 1730's and 40's, people in the western part of town found it inconvenient to attend church and town meetings at the meeting house on Church Street. In 1745 they succeeded in passing a resolution to build a new meeting house within six years and within twenty rods of the actual center of town. A survey was made, and a "monument" of stones erected at the central point on the property of Benjamin Pettingill (somewhere near the junction of Black Brook Road and Route 123). Ironically, two hundred and fifty years later Eastoners still give directions in Easton Center by the "monument", but now they are referring to the Civil War Monument.

The decision to move the meeting house proved controversial, but it was finally located on the northwest corner of Center and Depot Streets as a concession to the people in the eastern half of town. Even this did not satisfy the dissidents. When the sills were laid in 1750, Eliphalet Leonard of North Easton, the leader of the dissidents, said he would only attend meetings in the building if the majority consented to move the sills the distance of his pipestem northwards. When the majority refused, the controversy continued and, enlarged by religious differences, nearly split the town. The only thing keeping the town together was that the dissidents, with town minister Reverend Solomon Prentice, had become Presbyterians. The General Court was reluctant, in those days of state support for the Congregational Church, to create a Presbyterian town. The church controversy was more than a religious conflict, however. It began the neighborhood wrangling that would go on for two centuries until the end of independent water districts.

A description of this meeting house survives from the ordination of William Reed in 1784. At that time men would arrive for church on horseback with their wives on pillions behind them. They would then pull up to the horse block for their wives to dismount. This was a seven foot long stone slab raised about three feet high on brickwork with steps at one end.

Once dismounted the parishoners faced a bare, weather stained and unpainted square building without a belfry or porch. These two amenities along with a bell were added about ten years later. The meeting house could be entered through doors on the south, east, and west sides. In the center of the north side was an angular pulpit with a sounding board suspended above it on an iron rod. The deacon's pew was beside the pulpit. The front seats in the center were reserved for the elderly and hard of hearing. Behind these were the old square high backed family pews that were rented from the parish. On the left and right were the common seats, one side for men and the other for women. These seats could be turned up to provide more room when the people stood for prayer. The meeting house had a low gallery reached by separate stairs for men and women. In other towns this gallery was reserved for black people and troublesome boys, but we don't know whether segregated arrangements were in use here. While the meeting house had clear glass windows, it was never heated nor was there an organ to lead the congregation in song. That job was held by three men called tuners who sounded the key note to begin each hymn.

The town stocks, the symbol of Puritan justice, were in front of the meeting house. Whether through the actions of the weather or strict law enforcement, Easton had already worn out at least one set of stocks by the year 1788. Samuel Stone made and delivered new ones to the meeting house in March 1788. He received 10 shillings for his work.

Once the meeting house moved to Easton Center municipal services remained in the area for a long time. The town pound, a stone enclosure for holding stray animals, was on the south side of Depot Street just east of the Congregational Church. The powder house was on Center Street a little north of the meeting house. The militia stored its powder and shot here until sometime in the Nineteenth Century.

Even though the meeting house was no longer on Church Street, the old cemetery there continued to be utilized by persons from all over town. However, by the Nineteenth Century its location on a nearly deserted cart path was no longer attractive for persons who wished to be buried nearer home. Thus, in 1803, Central Cemetery on Center Street was set aside for the town. With the establishment of the Central Cemetery Corporation in 1854, the cemetery expanded on three sides. Families moved several previous burials to the expanded cemetery including Easton's first minister Matthew Short. These moves were to prevent vandalism which was then destroying many of the stones on Church Street.

In 1817 the Town constructed, on the northwest corner of Depot and Center Streets, a new building for both the Congregational Society and town meetings. A small two story chapel was also built at this time north of the meeting house.

Over the years another religious schism opened in town with the development of Unitarianism. Finally, on the afternoon of September 16, 1832 Luther Sheldon, the orthodox Congregationalist minister, was forcibly prevented from occupying his pulpit in the church by Daniel Wheaton, Elijah Howard and Horatio Ames. Sheldon then led the Congregationalists in the parish to a grove south of his home ( 404 Center Street) where he preached from an outdoor pulpit which may still be seen today. The controversy between Congregationalists and Unitarians was bitter, but it didn't threaten to split the town. The reasons for this were the good sense and fine character of Luther Sheldon. He remained firm in his orthodox Congregational faith, but worked to end the rancor between the sects.

During a time of uneasy transition, the Congregationalists met in the chapel north of the meeting house. This building was too small to hold the congregation on one floor, so Sheldon preached to the women and the choir on the second floor. About eight feet in front of the minister's desk a six foot in diameter hole was cut in the floor to allow the menfolk downstairs to hear the sermon and hymns! This little chapel also hosted meetings of the Whig political party before serving as a coffin warehouse for Daniel Reed. In 1839 Reverend Mr. Sheldon's followers organized the Easton Evangelical Congregational Society. Their church, built on the site of the present one east of Center Street, burned September 6, 1882. The current church was dedicated March 19, 1885.

Sheldon was not the typically dour Puritan minister. He enjoyed good company, and his home was often filled with friends for convivial dinner parties. Sheldon enjoyed children, and he and his wife ran a private school in the house to supplement his salary. He was also an avid farmer who could cut hay with the fastest of his parishoners. The Center Street farm was home to the common run of farm animals like dogs, chickens and cows plus turkeys, guinea hens, pigeons, rabbits, bees, purple martins, and squirrels in the attic. No wonder children loved to visit the minister and his wife!

Sheldon's first wife, Sarah Harris, deserves special mention in these pages. She had already gained a reputation as a fine school teacher at age twenty-two when Sheldon married her in New Hampshire in 1812. Not only did she ably assist her husband in their family school and through forty years of marriage, she in later years became an ardent abolitionist. Chaffin noted

It was at a day when "Abolitionist" was a term of reproach; but she never shank from declaring her sympathy for the downtrodden slave, and avowed her faith in his ultimate redemption from bondage.

Because she had such strong feelings, one may wonder whether the old house on Center Street may not have hidden something other than squirrels in the attic. Perhaps this home was also a stop on the Underground Railroad.

After Sheldon's ouster in 1832, Unitarian pastors served in the main church. In 1845 when Reverend Paul Dean became minister, the Unitarians, still calling themselves the First Congregational Parish, remodeled the 1817 era meeting house. It may have been at this time that a small chapel was built just north of the main church. They added a second floor where the Parish conducted church services. The Town hired the first floor, a large hall, for town meetings. Eastoners met here until it was totally destroyed by fire on January 27, 1886. During Reverend Mr. Dean's ministry, he was very active in the Masonic movement. Today's local Masonic lodge is named for him.

Subsequent to the fire of 1886 the Town bought the First Parish land and erected a town hall on the old church site. This new building held many town meetings and other events including basketball games during the early 1900's. With the construction of the high school gymnasium-auditorium in 1930, most of the town's activities moved there, and the Town Hall at the Center was no longer needed. The building, taken down in 1943, had some of its wood used in the construction of the house at 367 Depot Street. Thus, after nearly two hundred years, the government of Easton passed from the Center.

The Center also provided other municipal services during its heyday. In January 1838 the town of Easton bought the Jedidiah Packard farm for use as an almshouse and poor farm. The land around the current Center School and to its south and west was worked by the indigents to subsidize some of the costs of their care. This was a giant step forward in

Easton's treatment of the poor. Before this date, the poor, mostly local people who were old or mentally disabled, were auctioned annually to the lowest bidder. In 1874 the Town built a new almshouse and moved its predecessor to the north side of Depot Street. The new building had twenty-two rooms on an ell on the west side. There was also a large dining room for the inmates. The farm house stood about two hundred and fifty feet from the street. A large barn was also built then. That barn, and another built later to replace it, burned down through the carelessness of a resident.

In the later Nineteenth Century, the character of the poor farm changed somewhat allowing short term stays by tramps. In 1876, 474 tramps visited the Easton poor farm. By 1894, a depression year, this number had risen to 1819 tramps.

Around the turn of the century Charlie Scott was the warden of the almshouse and did a fine job with the help of his wife. In 1906 there were ten residents—four males and six females, and the typical cost per week amounted to \$1.96 per person. The warden's salary at the time was \$500.00 a year. Farm stock consisted of two horses, thirteen cows, two 2-year heifers, one bull, four calves, two swine, and 145 fowl. Clearly, the farm could make money for the town selling surplus eggs and milk.

The poor farm remained in use until 1940. The last warden, J. A. Arnold, received \$1,000 a year for caring for the inmates and the farm. The Town found then that the five inmates cost \$900 a year to provide for. The Town moved the remaining residents to the Middleborough Town Infirmary where they were cared for at the cost of \$365 each. Most of the property was sold in July 1942 for about \$7,000.

In 1885, perhaps because of the tramp problem, the Town voted to demolish one of the old buildings on the Town Farm and to replace it with a structure suitable for a police lockup. Made of red brick and having three cells, the lockup was about twenty feet by ten feet. It was located in the School Street section of the farm.

Most of the trouble in the Center came there from other neighborhoods. Easton Center itself grew slowly. The first school in the district was built around 1793 near the location of the current Center School. It lasted until 1818 when a new brick school was built on the same site. Chaffin's *History of Easton* includes this description clearly derived from a scholar at the brick temple of learning:

The new brick building was thought to be a grand affair, as were probably the other brick schoolhouses built about the same time. It had a central aisle running lengthwise from the door to the teacher's desk; on either side of this were several rows of desks, each row being a step higher than the one in front. The boys sat on one side, and the girls on the other, directly opposite each other, thus facilitating the interchange of such facial expressions as school boys and girls from time immemorial have been happy to indulge in. The fireplace of olden times had given way to a stove, which occupied the center, before whose red-hot sides the scholars roasted their cheeks, scorched their clothes, and burned the toes of their boots and shoes. The older scholars sat in the "back row" of desks, which were high enough to enable their occupants to look out of the high windows, where the glances they stole at the outside world excited the envy of the small scholars who considered it a rare treat to be occasionally allowed to visit a "big scholar" in a back seat.

This building had become so decayed by 1845 that there was a fear that the scholars, big or small, would fall through the floor. At that time the building was completely repaired and the seats turned to face the teacher's desk. A decade later the parents of the district held several heated discussions before deciding to build a new school rather than expend more money for repairs on the old one.

This new Center School, built in 1856, was made of wood not brick, but it too had only one room. The school was enlarged to its present size to accommodate an enrollment of 64. When the student population gradually decreased and transportation became easier, the Town closed the school in 1931. This building (350 Depot Street) still stands across the street from the Evangelical Congregational Church. It subsequently became the headquarters of the Veteran of Foreign Wars, Pvt. George F. Schindler Post 2547, and is now privately owned. In 1954, education returned to the neighborhood with the opening of the current Center School.

Of course, the most recognizable symbol of Easton Center is the Civil War Monument which became part of the town seal in 1902. The 1880 March town meeting selected a committee to consider plans for this memorial, and the next year the meeting approved the committee's plan for a monument. The Town appropriated a sum of five thousand dollars for expenses. The monument was unveiled on Memorial Day 1882. The granite structure is twenty-five feet high, including the statue. On the top an eight foot tall Union Soldier stands with his rifle at parade rest. The names of forty-seven Easton men who died in the Civil War are inscribed on the panels at the base.

Two thousand persons attended the dedication with more than two hundred carriages drawn up to transport the assembled guests to their homes in other parts of town. Reflecting the continuity that makes a community, persons still gather at the monument every Memorial Day.

In another example of historical continuity, Martland's Band of Brockton, which played at the dedication of the monument in 1882, had been the regimental band for the Twelfth Massachusetts Regiment of Infantry during the Civil War. This band had introduced the song "John Brown's Body" to the country. A century later members of the Twelfth Massachusetts Regimental Association took part in the impressive rededication ceremonies for the monument in 1982 conducted by the Easton Historical Commission.

Easton Center long remained primarily an agricultural area with some of the best farms in town. One of these belonged to the Reverend William Reed and his descendants. The farm house still stands today past its two hundredth year at 364 Depot Street. Its history is most revealing of life at the Center. The story began in 1782 on the border of Abington and Bridgewater when William Reed, about to graduate from Harvard, visited the home of Samuel Pool to invite the eldest daughter to be his graduation guest. She refused as did the second daughter, but the third daughter Olive, twelve years younger than Reed, agreed to go if only she had a proper dress. Our future minister gallantly bought the material himself and had his sisters sew up the dress. It was a "scarlet silk dress 'trailing half a yard,' open in front with gauze handkerchief, white petticoat and embroidered apron with strings tied in front." The dress must have made an impression on William Reed, for he married Olive Pool (born 1766) in that same dress a month after his ordination in Easton in May, 1784.

The young couple moved into a house nearly opposite the present School Street, but by 1786 he, no doubt with the help of his parishioners, had built the house at 364 Depot Street. Over the years the house has been enlarged, but the original plan seems to have favored Mrs. Reed. It had a large kitchen with a deep open hearth fireplace and a grand pantry. Mrs. Reed would need the large kitchen; in May, 1787 William 2<sup>nd</sup> was born followed by at least eight other children.

Besides cooking and cleaning, the Eighteenth Century housewife also had to provide

her family with clothes. Working by firelight after the daily chores were done, Olive Reed seems to have been an expert in this duty. Once, when a son returned from school, she spun and wove three yards of cotton cloth and sewed it into a shirt within twenty-four hours!

Sadness came to the house on August, 1793 when a child, the seventeen month old Olive, became the first person to die in the house. The funeral took place outside with a burial under a walnut tree nearby. Unexpected death came again in November, 1809 when Reverend William Reed passed on at age fifty-four. All of Olive Reed's skills would be needed to provide for the several young children still at home.

Reed had lived to see his son David graduate from Brown in 1809 with high honors. With his older brother William a year behind him at Brown and with children to support at home, David Reed took a job running the Bridgewater Academy while studying for the ministry. Later in life, he became well known as one of the founders of Unitarianism. In 1810 brother William graduated from Brown and also took a teaching job to help support the family. He taught in Plymouth and at Milton Academy. He too studied for the ministry, but he never took a permanent settlement. When his mother grew older, he and his family moved back to Easton. Here he served as a Justice of the Peace for many years before his death in 1864.

The efforts of mother and older brothers allowed one other brother to graduate from college. James Reed graduated from Harvard in 1816 and became a prominent lawyer in Milton. Three college graduates in one family was extremely rare in those days, and Olive Reed must get a lot of the credit for her family's success. Still, the early death of Mr. Reed put a strain on the family. Olive Reed died in March, 1850. Many years later a grandchild inscribed on a stone in the Central Cemetery that Olive Reed was "followed to the grave by a daughter and seven sons who till then had all met but once forty years before at the death of their father."

By the time of Olive Reed's death a third generation of Reeds was probably living in the house. Charles Henry Reed was born in 1818 while his father William 2<sup>nd</sup> was at Milton Academy. He married in 1840 and lived for several years in South Boston before coming to the homestead farm in Easton Center. There he seems to have made his living from farming. His wife Mary seems to have had much in common with her husband's grandmother Olive. She too was known for her skills at the womanly arts, and her home was frequently filled with visitors. Charles Henry and Mary B. Reed celebrated their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary in the old house in 1865, the first of three successive generations to do so. Indeed, Charles and Mary lived to celebrate their fiftieth anniversary with one hundred family and friends in 1890.

Two years later their son, Charles D. Reed and his wife Mary Clark Reed celebrated their twenty-fifth anniversary in the house. Like his father and grandfather, Charles D. Reed, born in 1842, had left Easton to find his fortune. He had travelled to Sandwich, Illinois where he met his wife who had been born in Philadelphia. They returned to Easton about 1873. The younger Reed transformed the old homestead into a poultry farm, but he and his wife continued the family tradition of hospitality. When Mrs. Reed died in 1915, her obituary called her "Grandma" Reed, Beloved of Salesgirls. The Reeds apparently made weekly trips to the department stores of Brockton where they befriended the young salesgirls. Their home was open to all and "many a tired saleswoman has found a resting place there during an illness."

With Charles D. Reed's interest in poultry, it is perhaps not surprising that his daughter Mary married James H. Rankin, the son of James Rankin, the father of the modern poultry industry, who lived at the present site of the Easton Country Club. The wedding took place on the forty-ninth anniversary of Mary Reed's grandparents. James and his new bride moved into a new house, but by their twenty-fifth anniversary in 1914 they too were living at the old Reed homestead. Rankin continued the family poultry business by raising Plymouth Rock chickens.

More than many other houses the Reeds' old home seems to have been a place of hospitality and love. The women of the house, beginning with Olive Reed, seem to have taken seriously their role as mistresses of the big house at the center of town. History has been unkind to women who were not allowed to take part in events that find their way into history books, but we should remember the role played by the Reed wives as they made their house a place to return to through successive generations

Another farm of note belonged to Lemuel K. Wilbur. Towards the end of the Nineteenth Century, Lemuel K. Wilbur lived in the house at 497 Depot Street. His large farm included the old Benjamin Pettingill place at what was considered the exact center of town. Wilbur prospered as a farmer and businessman and became a leading investor in the Mansfield and Easton Street Railway which ran right by his house. The little sheds between the house and barn at 497 Depot Street were originally used to house the workers who built the trolley. Wilbur also was one of the jurors in the famous Lizzie Borden case.

Industry developed slowly in the neighborhood, but shortly after 1800 Oliver Pool put up a building in the Center to make metal brushes, called cards, for cleaning raw textiles. This small factory was east of the Church. It was not too successful and later became a general store. Perhaps the old factory/store is now the house at 336 Depot Street.

Change began to come a little more rapidly when the Old Colony Railroad extended rail service from North Easton to Taunton in 1866. Before that time an accommodation stage, which started operation in 1829, connected Easton Center to North Easton. Although lacking in water power, Easton Center now had a transportation advantage that other neighborhoods lacked. A hint of the boon of rail transportation to the district comes from the passenger records of November 1868. In that month 45 passengers went to Stoughton from North Easton, but 34 went to Easton Center. The fare in both directions was 15 cents. The Easton Center Depot was on the west side of the tracks just west of the present Fernandes Lumber (299 Depot Street). Eventually one of the buildings from the old station was moved behind the Evangelical Congregational Church.

By 1886 the small Lackie and Davis boot shop was also in the Center, and for many years a cider mill had been in operation on the east side of Center Street just south of Short Street. At some point before 1911 John G. Grant and Wallace Smith Grant started the Grant Brothers Foundry. The Grants bought an existing building which had been used as a foundry after 1886. This building was located near the Easton Center Depot on the north side of Depot Street well back from the street. The entrance was just west of what is now Fernandes Lumber. The foundry employed about a dozen people in the production of one-of-a-kind or limited run castings. The brothers made some parts for the Morse car as well as railroad wheels. The 1911 Town Directory notes that gasoline cylinders were a specialty.

A fire in the foundry ended the Grants' business, but in the 1930's another foundry

owned and operated by Ralph Gardner opened on the same site. This foundry specialized in grates for domestic and industrial boilers. Mr. Gardner was quickly nicknamed “the Grate Man.” In the years before World War II demand declined as industry converted from coal to oil, but the war caused a brief spurt of prosperity. Mr. Gardner finally sold the business to George Ryan who operated a very progressive foundry business into the 1980’s. Today the site is used by the DeAngelis Iron Company.

The Center acquired a Post Office in 1893. Surprisingly, it was not at the Depot but in an ell of the house now occupied by David Rohdin (429 Depot Street). Olive Gilmore became the first Postmistress. Mrs. Calvin Howes carried the mail from the post office to the Easton railroad station and back again. Later, the office was moved to a house across the street. In 1910 the office closed, and business was transferred to the South Easton Post Office.

In 1899 transportation in the Center took another jump with the arrival of the Mansfield and Easton Street Railway. These trolleys, in operation until the end of 1909, came through the neighborhood along Depot Street before turning up the east side of Center Street. The stone walls along Center Street were moved back to accommodate the route providing room a century later for one of the most well travelled sidewalks in town. An important function of this trolley was the transportation of students to the High School in North Easton.

Only a few years after the trolley went into receivership, Harold Turner, an enterprising twenty year old from Easton Center, tried to fill the void. In 1913 he opened the first bus line to serve Easton and Mansfield. Starting in North Easton at the Square, the route ran through Easton Center, Easton Furnace, East Mansfield and finished at the Mansfield Depot. The original bus was an eight passenger, four cylinder Pierce Arrow limousine with a 1906 Royal Tourist open touring car for a spare. The line was so successful in its early months that Mr. Turner secured a one ton Federal truck with a school bus body that would seat about 20 passengers. Sadly, this fledgling enterprise died in October 1913 when cool weather began to discourage adult riders and when Mr. Turner failed to win the school bus contract for East Mansfield students.

Other businesses at the Center have been more successful. One which has lasted for 45 years is Fernandes Lumber begun in 1958. Started in 1929 by the MacLeod family, another long time resident of the district is Johnny’s Cider Mill. The MacLeod’s original mill was closer to the street than the present one; the old foundation can still be traced in today’s parking area. The present mill was erected in 1952. The Freitas family has made award winning cider there since 1964.

Along with the growth of business, another example of Easton Center’s status as an independent neighborhood came in 1935. In that year the neighborhood became a water district. The neighborhood bought water from the North Easton District until the district system ended in 1958.

The district system caused much ill will in town and reminds us that the Devil has long been absent from this narrative. However, his presence was still strongly felt in the neighborhood as late as the 1920’s. In the post World War One era of the Red Scare and anti-immigrant feelings, some in Easton gave way to prejudice, and the Ku Klux Klan became active here. Here is a description of one Klan rally by a bystander:

The meeting was held in the vestry of the church at the Center and was one of the largest gatherings I ever saw in the town. I should say several hundred men were there. The church wasn’t large enough to accommodate them so the crowd extended

outside the building.

At the close of the meeting, all got into their autos and were led to a large rectangular field [on Poquanticut Avenue on the curve northwest of Beaver Dam Road] where the autos were parked around its four sides, lights turned to the center. I can remember the burning of a huge cross in the center of one end of the field. Some of the leaders wore hoods and the whole procedure was frightening and disgusting.

Clearly the Devil was at work again. William Milhomme, a Foxborough historian, wrote in the July, 1985 edition of *Heritage* magazine about another incident that occurred on a Saturday night in April, 1925. In Mansfield around 9 p.m. a noise was heard coming from Easton. Soon a line of autos appeared carrying young men in white hooded uniforms. The arm waving, honking "spontaneous" parade was a trademark of the Klan at this time. After passing down Main Street in Mansfield, the tour continued through Norton before ending back in Easton. At its height in 1925 the Klan claimed 130,000 members in Massachusetts, but the common sense of most people was not fertile ground for this kind of deviltry, so the Klan quickly passed away. By 1930 there were only 720 members in the state. Still, at least some Eastoners held onto their paraphernalia even if they gave up the anti-immigrant fervor of the Klan; the granddaughter of the Klan Field's owner remembers playing dress up in robes she discovered hidden away in a drawer.

Today, Easton Center is a residential neighborhood, but most Eastoners still visit it often along busy Depot or Center Streets. The sidewalks along these streets are also busy with joggers and walkers. All are well advised to look out for a gentleman with cloven hooves. You never know in Easton!

## Howard Neighborhood

If you travel along Dean and Howard Streets on a rainy night, you can still get a feel for what Easton was like in earlier times. Trees overarch the dark narrow road, and it seems that Elijah Howard could step out of the fog at any minute. Many places in Easton claim to have their ghosts, but no neighborhood can give one the eerie feeling of stepping back in time as can the Howard neighborhood on a stormy night.

In one sense, this is Easton's oldest neighborhood because on property owned by the Easton Rod and Gun Club, archaeologists have found a hearth used by Indians of the Archaic Age. Those people were living here when the pyramids were new or perhaps even before. The family for which the neighborhood is named is a late comer by those standards, and even by the standards of European settlement; the Howards are relatively late arrivals in Easton.

The Howard family has been such a prominent one in Easton for so many generations that it is hard to believe they were not among the very earliest settlers. John Howard of Bridgewater acquired many tracts of land in the North Purchase which were divided among his children, but the first Howards to settle in Easton were his grandsons Joshua and Henry Howard. These brothers moved to Easton after 1733. Joshua lived on Prospect Street near the site of Pine Oaks golf course, and Henry built his home on the high ground just above Alger's Corner (the junction of Foundry Street and Turnpike Street). Joshua had seven children, but neither of his two sons survived to adulthood. Henry Howard and his wife Mary had ten children including two boys to carry on his name. The younger of these two sons, Elijah, was born in 1744 and spent much of his youth with his Uncle Joshua. It was Elijah who would be the first Howard to move to the neighborhood

that now bears the family name.

The Howard neighborhood is that section of Prospect Street east of the Bay Road and west of Pratt's Corner on Foundry Street and including within its bounds Howard and Dean Streets. In the mid-Nineteenth Century the town considered this neighborhood and the nearby Hayward-Pool neighborhood to be one unit. Hayward and Pool children attended school on Howard Street. However, the development of the two districts have always proceeded along somewhat different lines, so each gets separate attention in these pages.

The Town laid out Prospect Street between 1697 and 1699 to get travellers from Eastondale to Bay Road. At that time the road continued over Purchase Street to connect with Church Street near the original meeting house. The present route of this road was only established in 1852. A mix of swamp and hills with no major source of water power, the neighborhood was not particularly attractive for the first generation of Easton's hardworking settlers.

One exception was apparently John Austin of Taunton who, according to Chaffin, bought land and built a house "not far from the No. 3 schoolhouse [36 Howard Street]" about 1709. This Austin was a "rough character" who earned a living as a shoemaker. He had three wives within fourteen months due to the deaths of his first two wives; this is certainly still a record in Easton at least without benefit of divorce. Chaffin notes that in 1739 he was convicted of "prophaine cursing" and in 1740 "indicted for a far worse offence." Whatever the offense, Austin continued to live in Easton until the mid-1750's.

It is difficult to determine who Austin's neighbors were. Chaffin's 1750 map notes a house just west of Howard Street called "Wittoms old House," but who Wittoms was he does not tell us. A William Wittoms and family did live in Easton beginning as early as the 1730's, so he is probably the mystery resident. Who built "Wittoms old House" is unknown. It appears in the correct location for John Austin's 1709 house which could explain both its designation as "old" in 1750 and the absence of Austin's home from Chaffin's map.

The house at the corner of Howard and Prospect Streets (now 2 Howard Street) is also mysterious. Tradition says that Elijah Howard built it himself, but some of the style features seem older than his arrival in the neighborhood as a newlywed in 1768 or 1769. Howard Street itself was laid out in 1753 from the Norton line to Prospect Street, and this seems about the time when second generation settlers would have begun to move into the area.

In 1771 Howard moved his new family further along Howard Street to what is now 109 Howard Street. The home which he built on this site burned in 1985, but his descendants rebuilt and still live there. Two hundred and twenty-one years by a single family on one site is close to the current record in Easton. No wonder the neighborhood is named for them!

The second Howard to own this house was Edwin Howard who took care of his mother and father Elijah, and his wife's parents in their old age. The old folks plus Edwin and his wife and three children must have crowded the little Cape. In the words of his grandson George, Edwin Howard was:

rather a gentleman farmer, as we think, but carried the farm successfully, until he turned it over to my father Edwin Dwelly Howard about Civil War times. He improved the land, raising all the usual crops and animals. He set out two orchards and nut trees and shade trees. He gave some land to his daughter Sarah and sold

outlying woodland so that his conveyance to father was about 40 acres. He was a good mechanic and made many useful things for farm and house of the convenient wood. In his later years he engaged in hunting and trapping. Ben Dean of Taunton called every spring to buy his skins of fox, mink, etc..

Grandpa Edwin lived for his last 15 years with son and daughter-in-law and the children—usefully and happily. It is on record that he said of his daughter-in-law that she was nice—and good to him and a good mother. (But it is said she did not like his tobacco chewing.)

Grandpa Edwin died in the parlor of the old house April 1, 1877. It is said he, on his last day, called for his oldest grandson, Heman, gave him his final word and his big jackknife. Jonathan Pratt had charge of the funeral. Cousin Celestine placed some green posies on his coffin. Nelson Soule dug his grave. He was buried in the Elijah Howard cemetery [on Prospect Street] beside his waiting predecessors.

During the second half of the Eighteenth Century, the neighborhood grew as more and more farms started. About 1793 the first school building was built in this area. Before 1793 school was held in private houses, sometimes in an unfinished chamber at Elijah Howard's and sometimes in his corn-house.

In the following description Heman Howard tells of his grandfather Edwin's school days:

The inhabitants of District No.3 raised twenty-four pounds and nineteen shillings to build the new school, and it was painted red. The school-building was 20 or 25 feet in length and 15 feet wide. There were six small windows high above the floor. The inside of the room was never painted. The seats were wooden benches around three sides of the room. The scholars faced toward the center of the room. One row of desks with openings in the center of the rows and a row of long seats for small scholars was built around in front of the desks. When a scholar whose seat was not near the opening had occasion to come forward, the others would lean over and he would walk behind them on the seats, and sometimes over the tops of the desks in front. One teacher had a rod long enough to reach any scholar in the room from where he sat

This school never had a stove. A brick fire-place occupied the middle of the south end of the room. At one side there was a small closet for the girls' hats and wraps and dinner pails and on the other side a small entry for the boys where about one half a cord of wood was kept. The school boys were expected to cut and split the wood and make the fire

The winter term commenced the first Monday after Thanksgiving and continued for ten or twelve weeks. The summer term began the first Monday in June and was about the same length.

On very cold days one-half the scholars would be standing in a semi-circle around the fire and when they were somewhat warmed would give their places to the other half who were shivering in their seats.

The summer term of 1845 was the last one in the old building. James Howard of West Bridgewater was the last teacher in the old building and the first in the new building across the street. At the close of the last term in the old building, Oliver Ames, Jr. visited and pronounced it Number One in the town.

The new school across the street was occupied at the beginning of the winter term of 1845-46. This building was in use until 1926. It is now a private residence at 36 Howard Street. In later years after the High School opened in North Easton, students wishing to complete their education walked two and a half miles to the train depot at Easton Center and then took the train to North Easton. Thus they walked five miles a day, over an hour, rain or shine, to get a high school diploma!

Edwin Howard was not the only son of old Elijah to attend school in the old building. His older brother Elijah, Jr. attended also and went on to make his old neighborhood proud. The boys' father Elijah had risen to prominence despite the "wilderness" location of his home. In 1775 the elder Howard had served as Ensign in the company of ninety-seven Eastoners who marched to Boston on the Lexington alarm. Later, when he served as a trial judge, Eastoners beat a path to Howard Street where Elijah Howard, Senior held court in the east room of his home. This certainly was a stimulating environment for Elijah, Jr. who continued his father's commitment to public service while leaving farming for a career in business.

The story of Elijah Howard, Junior's business ventures must be told in other chapters because the Howard neighborhood had no water power to turn a mill. With his business growing in other parts of town, Elijah finally moved from his home neighborhood probably in 1815 when he built a beautiful Federal style house with brick ends on Washington Street. At that same time his younger brother Edwin reaffirmed his family's commitment to the Howard neighborhood by building a nearly identical home near the family farm on Howard Street

Throughout its history the Howard neighborhood has remained first agricultural and then residential. History notes only three industrial activities. Some time during the Nineteenth Century Barzillai Drake cut wood and made charcoal in the woods off Prospect Street west of Howard Street. During that time Asa R. Howard had a small hoe making shop on the corner of Howard Street opposite Elijah Howard's first house. Asa Howard made hoes to supplement his farming income. When he completed a load of hoes, he would take them to South Easton to be polished in Calvin Brett's mill. Finally, residents Charles Wade, Edwin Dwelly Howard, and perhaps others made shoes at their homes. Howard, who learned the trade from Wade, bought mostly boot uppers from a Tisdale in West Bridgewater and completed the boot bottoms in a small shop on his farm. He and the others were successful until the 1870's when competition from factories in Brockton running the new heavy duty bootmaking machines made hand labor obsolete.

Two brothers with an interesting business resided in the neighborhood around the time of the Civil War and after. They were Simeon and Otis Bradford Dean. These men were "braid peddlers." This meant they carried straw braid from the factories to women's homes to be sewn into straw hats. This was a good way for an industrious woman to make extra money for her family or herself. The country nature of the straw hat trade seems to have prevented abuses, but it is the same system of labor that exploited many poor urban women and immigrants in the garment industry.

As mentioned, the Howard Neighborhood was primarily agricultural. Interestingly, a Nineteenth Century farmer in this neighborhood experimented with a crop which was soon something of a fad around town. This was hops, a quick growing vine, which is a necessary component of beer. The American hops growing business began towards the end of the Revolutionary War in Middlesex county, Massachusetts, but apparently no one in Easton bothered to learn about this potentially valuable crop.

Cyrus Howard married Joseph Hayward's daughter Elizabeth and moved to Hamilton, New York in 1799. Coincidentally, around 1825 farmers in Howard's part of upstate New York began to grow hops and after a decade their competition severely hurt the business in Middlesex County. One of Cyrus Howard's sons, Eliphalet Smith Howard, returned to Easton and settled on the east side of Howard Street directly south of the

school house. He soon began to grow hops on his farm and built a hop kiln for drying this popular beer flavoring ingredient. The Hayward family quickly adopted the crop in their neighborhood, and other hop kilns sprang up in other neighborhoods as well. Thus, while hops production in the rest of Massachusetts was declining, Easton farmers were able to keep it as a cash crop until many years after the Civil War.

History too often focuses on famous individuals or important political or economic events. Historians fail to mention how life was lived in the past. George Howard has left us a description of growing up in the Howard Neighborhood during the 1880's and early 1890's that is a window into the life of people like ourselves a century ago:

We boys could be very useful and were kept busy, as all boys should be, at study, work and play. We were to keep the wood box full, help feed the animals and help plant and harvest the crops. The middle-sized boy was to ride the horse for plowing and cultivating. We picked apples and blueberries, and hops, etc., etc., etc.. We set the table and wiped dishes and made our own beds at times. We worked "on the road" at times for a little money in "breking out the rud" after a snow storm and otherwise. We went swimming on occasion although we had to go a mile to the "swimming hole" in the big meadows. We liked to go barefoot in summer—who would not? We played ball and all the games, and all the neighborhood slid down the hill by our house in winter, and we went skating. We and all the neighbors hung "May baskets" in season. We once in a while had an affair at the school house, a picnic, and perhaps a husking bee. We went to the "cattle show" at Taunton in the Autumn. We played the harmless card games.... Bicycles were just coming into use, but we boys had them a little later.

We had the St. Nicholas magazine and the Youth's Companion, Sunday-school papers, the Watchman, books from the library and the weekly Traveler.... We sometimes walked two miles to the post-office but usually got mail once a week via the groceryman. Tramps occasionally visited us going from Brockton to Taunton. We had tin peddlers and fish peddlers and occasionally quack-doctor peddlers. We went to Taunton to buy clothes and "women's and girl's things." We boys all had accounts in the Bristol County National Bank—our own—but planned and helped upward by our parents. The accounts were made up and accelerated by sale of a couple of sheep, a co-operative cow, chickens carefully raised and tended, a little from snares set for partridge and rabbits and from some work done outside.

How about the girls? My sister Annie says they played croquet, ball and other games with the boys and went skating. She mentions our Thanksgivings at Grandmother Hunt's which were pleasing occasions and Christmas affairs and presents—one a rocking horse. She says they played "house" under the pines and assiduously. She speaks particularly of Lottie Heath, our neighbor and teacher, who was always good to the girls, teaching them how to make Christmas presents, etc. as well as school book learning. She says she and twin sister Alice were always called on for recitations. They sang school songs particularly going over the hill with the Dailey girls to sing to Aunt Sylvia Hayward [the spouse of George Washington Hayward]. Which all reminds me that while the girls were not so numerous as the boys they were of consequence—sister Annie noting that three of the lot became "schoolmarms."

Although once one of Easton's least populated old districts, the Howard Neighborhood more than holds its own in interesting stories. Today, the neighborhood has become residential, but for the most part development has been limited to the original streets, so one can still see the layout of the old farms. With the Easton Rod and Gun Club at its southwestern edge providing undeveloped space, the neighborhood retains the characteristics that other neighborhoods lost with the building boom of the 1970's and 1980's. A life like George Howard describes is not so far away in his old neighborhood.