

The uncommon past of our common

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What is the oldest site in Chelmsford that is still used for the same purpose it served when the first settlers put down roots here? It even predates Forefathers Burying Ground and the location of the first church in town (now the First Parish).

It's the greensward located between Westford Street, Academy Street, and North Road, known as **The Common**. There is no record of it having, at any time, been owned by a private individual but has always been commonly owned property of the citizens of Chelmsford.

The term "Common" was originally applied to land which had not yet been subdivided and assigned to specific settlers. Sections of this commonly owned land were fenced off and used for pasturing the livestock of families in that area.

Thus, three town offices came into being. The Fence Viewer was a man who looked after the fences and made sure they met the standards set by a vote of the Selectmen in 1677: "...to be sufficient against great Cattell" or, as the phrase is, "horsehigh, bull strong, and pig tight."

Second was the Field Driver — a man who prevented wandering cattle from doing damage or becoming prey of wolves, and to impound strays. The Hog Reeve was the third office. He was charged with keeping the porcine population in its place.

As the town developed, the need for commonly owned pastures disappeared and the commonly owned land was used for town-sponsored activities. In the case of "The Common," it became the muster field and the location of the town's stocks where infractions of the law were punished, much to the amusement of passers-by.

The way It was

By George A.
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In the 1870's, The Common served to clarify the votes on particularly controversial issues at Town Meeting. The Town Hall at that time was what we know as the basement of the First Parish Church and was too small to provide seating for all the voters. So, when the moderator was in doubt as to who was voting how, he adjourned the meeting to The Common, directing those voting "aye" to one end of the grounds and the "noes" to the other.

The Yellow Schoolhouse was opened in the 1850's on the site of the present Central Fire Station. Although there were only four rooms, there was little space around the building for a playground and the addition of four more rooms a few years later eliminated what space had been available.

The Common, being just across the street and traffic being limited to a single horse-drawn vehicle once in a while, made an excellent playground including a baseball diamond.

The present writer recalls that, during his first six years of school here, most of the Common was hard-packed gravel with almost no grass. What passed as a baseball field took up most of the area between North Road and the monument with home plate in the corner of North Road and Academy Street. In the mid-1920's swings and see-

saws were installed in the corner near the Central Baptist Church.

In 1930 after the McFarlin School had opened on Wilson Street, The Common was graded and landscaped and became the park it is today.

The Revolutionary Monument that not only dominates the landscape but also serves as the focal point of the Town Seal was erected in 1859 by a group of private citizens. The beautiful purple beech tree was planted by the students of Chelmsford Center High School, which at that time shared the Yellow Schoolhouse with the elementary grades. (North Chelmsford had its own high school.)

In recent years two more monuments have been placed on The Common. The stone commemorating the School for the Deaf was dedicated in 1952 and the granite Veterans' Memorial was erected a few years later. Following the Bicentennial celebration in 1976, the old Middlesex Canal Toll House (1832) was placed in the northeast corner of The Common.

The Common and the historic sites surrounding it have been recognized as being significant to the 332 year history of our town and have, accordingly, been made the centerpiece of the Historic District which is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

In this "throw away economy," isn't it refreshing to know that there is one small tie with those who helped make our town the great place it is in which to live and bring up our families?

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