

# **Wachusett Mountain and Princeton**

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Almost the first land seen by a person on board a vessel approaching the Massachusetts coast is the summit of Wachusett Mountain; and any one standing upon its rocky top beholds more of Massachusetts than can be seen from any other mountain in the State. For these two reasons, if for no others, a short historical and scenographical description of this lonely and majestic eminence, and of the beautiful township in which it lies, would seem to be interesting.

Wachusett, or "Great Watchusett Hill," as it was originally called, lies in the northern part of the township of Princeton, and is about fifty miles due west from Boston. The Nashaways, or Nashuas, originally held this tract and all the land west of the river that still bears their name, and they gave to this mountain and the region around its base the name of "Watchusett." Rising by a gradual ascent from its base, it has the appearance of a vast dome. The Reverend Peter Whitney, speaking of its dimensions, says "The circumference of this monstrous mass is about three miles, and its height is 3,012 feet above the level of the sea, as was found by the Hon. John Winthrop, Esq., LL.D, in the year 1777: and this must be 1800 or 1900 feet above the level of the adjacent country." More recent measurements have not materially changed these figures, so they may be regarded as substantially correct.

The first mention, and probably the first sight of this mountain, or of any portion of the region now comprised in Worcester County, is recorded in Governor Winthrop's journal, in which, under the date of January 27, 1632, is written: "The Governor and some company with him, went up by Charles River about eight miles above Watertown." The party after climbing an eminence in the vicinity of their halting-place saw "a very high hill, due west about 40 miles off, and to the N. W. the high hills by Merrimack, above sixty miles off." The "very high hill" seen by them for the first time was unquestionably Wachusett.

"On the 20<sup>th</sup> of October, 1759, the General Court of Massachusetts, passed an act for incorporating the east wing, so called, of Rutland, together with sundry farms and some public lands contiguous thereto," as a district under the name of Prince Town, "to perpetuate the name and memory of the late Reverend Thomas Prince, colleague pastor of the Old South church in Boston, and a large proprietor of the tract of land." The district thus incorporated contained about nineteen thousand acres: but on April 24, 1771, its inhabitants petitioned the General Court, that it, "with all the lands adjoining said District, not included in and other town or District," be incorporated into a town by the name of Princeton; and by the granting of this petition, the area of the town was increased to twenty-two thousand acres.

The principal citizen of Princeton at this period was the Honorable Moses Gill, who married the daughter of the Reverend Thomas Prince. He was a man of considerable note in the county also, holding office as one of the judges of the court of common pleas for the county of Worcester, and being "for several years Counselor of this Commonwealth." His country-seat, located at Princeton, was a very extensive estate, comprising nearly three thousand acres. Mr. Whitney appears to have been personally familiar with this place, and his description of it is so graphic and enthusiastic, that it may be interesting to quote a portion of it.

"His noble and elegant seat is about one mile and a quarter from the meeting-house, to the south. The mansion-house is large, being fifty by fifty feet with four stacks of chimneys. The farmhouse is forty feet by 36-six feet. In a line with this stands the coach and chaise house, fifty feet by thirty-six. This is joined to the barn by a shed seventy feet in length – the barn is two hundred feet by thirty-two. Very elegant fences are erected around the mansion-house, the outhouses, and the garden. When we view this seat, these building and this farm of so many hundred acres under a high degree of profitable cultivation, and are told that in the year 1776 it was a perfect wilderness, we are struck with

wonder, admiration, and astonishment. Upon the whole, the seat of Judge Gill, all the agreeable circumstances respecting it being attentively considered, is not paralleled by any in the new England States: perhaps not by any this side of Delaware.”

Judge Gill was a very benevolent and enterprising man, and did much to advance the welfare of the town in its infancy. During the first thirty years of its existence, it increased rapidly in wealth and population, having in 1790 one thousand and sixteen inhabitants. For the next half-century it increased slowly, having in 1840 thirteen hundred forty-seven inhabitants. Since then, like all our beautiful New-England farming-towns, it has fallen off in population, having at the present time, but little over one thousand people dwelling within its limits. Yet neither town nor the character of the people has degenerated in the last century. Persevering industry has brought into existence in this town some of the most beautiful farms in New England, and in 1875 the value of farm products was nearly a quarter of a million dollars. Manufacturing has never been carried on to any great extent in this town. “In Princeton there are four grist mills, five saw mills, and one fulling mill and clothiers’ works,” says Whitney in 1793. Now lumber and chair-stock are the principal manufactured products, and in 1875 the value of these together with the products of other smaller manufacturing industries, was nearly seventy thousand dollars.

Princeton is the birthplace of several men who have become well known, among whom may be mentioned Edward Savage (1761-1817), noted as a skillful portrait-painter; David Everett (1770-1813), the journalist, and author of those familiar schoolboy verses beginning: “You’d scarce expect one of my age To speak in public on the stage”; and Leonard Woods, D.d., the eminent theologian.

This locality derives additional interest from the fact that Mrs. Rowlandson, in her book entitled *Twenty Removes*, designates it as the place where King Philip released her from captivity in the spring of 1676. Tradition still points out the spot where this release took place, in a meadow near a large boulder at the eastern base of the mountain. The boulder is known to this day as “Redemption Rock.” It is quite near the margin of Wachusett Lake, a beautiful sheet of water covering over one hundred acres. This is a favorite place for picnic parties from neighboring towns, and the several excellent hotels and boarding houses in the immediate vicinity afford accommodations for summer visitors, who frequent this locality in large numbers.

The Indian history of this region is brief, but what there is of it is interesting to us on account of King Philip’s connection with it. At the outbreak of the Narragansett War, in 1675, the Wachusetts, in spite of their solemn compact with the colonists, joined King Philip, and after his defeat, “the lands about the Wachusetts” became one of his headquarters, and he was frequently in that region. For many years their wigwams were scattered about the base of the mountain and along the border of the lake, and tradition informs us that on a large flat rock near the lake their council-fires were often lighted.

Until 1751, but three families had settled on this Wachusett tract to be eventually called Princeton. In May of that year Robert Keyes, a noted hunter, settled there with his family, upon the eastern slope of the mountain, near where the present carriage-road to the summit begins. On April 14, 1755, a child of his named Lucy, about five years old, strayed away, presumably to follow her sisters who had gone to the lake, about a mile distant. She was never heard of again, though the woods were diligently searched for weeks. Whitney speaks of this incident, and concludes that “she was taken by the Indians and carried into their country, and soon forgot her relations, lost her native language, and became one of the aborigines.” In 1765 Keyes petitioned the General Court to grant him “ye easterly half of said Wachusett hill” in consideration of the loss of “100 pounds of lawful money” incurred by him in seeking his lost child. The petitioned was endorsed “negatives” in the handwriting of the secretary. With this one exception the early settlers of Princeton seem to have suffered very little at the hands of the Indians.

Princeton, in common with its neighbors, underwent much religious controversy during the first half-century of its existence. The first meeting-house, “50 foote long and 40 foote wide,” was erected

in 1762 “on the highest part of the land, near three pine trees, being near a large flat rock.” This edifice was taken down in 1796, and replaced by a more “elegant” building, which in turn was removed in 1838. The three-pine trees are now no more, but the flat rock remains, and on account of the fine sunset view obtained from it, it has been named “Sunset Rock.”

The first minister in Princeton was reverend Timothy Fuller, settled in 1767. In 1768 the General Court granted him Wachusett Mountain to compensate him for his settlement over “a heavily burdened people in a wilderness country.” It was certainly at that time, neither a profitable nor useful gift, and it was a pity to have this grand old pile pass into private hands. Mr. Fuller continued as pastor until 1776. His successors were the Reverend Thomas Crafts, the Reverend Joseph Russell, and the Reverend James Murdock, D.D.. At the time when Dr. Murdock left, in 1815, Unitarian sentiments had developed extensively, and “the town and a minority of the church” called the Reverend Samuel Clarke, who had been a pupil of Dr. Channing. The call was accepted and, as a result, a portion of the church seceded and built a small house of worship; but in 1836 the church and society reunited, and has remained so ever since.

In 1817 a Baptist society was organized and had several pastors; but in 1844 the society began to diminish, and not long after ceased to exist. The meetinghouse was sold and is now a hotel – the Prospect House. In 1839 a Methodist Episcopal Church was organized which still flourishes.

Besides Wachusett Mountain there are two other hills in Princeton that are deserving of mention – Pine Hill and Little Wachusett. The former is about two miles from the center of the town and not far from Wachusett, and the latter is about half a mile north of the center. Neither of these hills is large or high, their elevation being about one thousand feet less than that of Wachusett, but they appear like two beautiful children of the majestic father that looms above them. All these hills were once heavily wooded, but much wood has been cut off during the past century (1886), and forest-fires have devastated portions at different times; yet there is still an abundance left. Whitney speaks of the region as abounding in oak of various kinds, chestnut, white ash, beech, birch, and maple with some butternut and walnut trees. The vigorous growth of the primeval forest indicated the strength and richness of the soil, which has since been turned to such profitable use by farmers. The house in which the people live are all substantial, convenient, and in many cases, beautiful, being surrounded by neatly kept grounds and well-tilled land.

In a hilly country such as this, springs and brooks of course abound. The height of land upon which Princeton is situated is a watershed between the Connecticut and Merrimack Rivers, and of the three beautiful brooks having their source in the township, one Wachusett Brook, runs into Ware River, and thence to the Connecticut, while the other two, east Wachusett and keys Brooks, get to the Merrimack by Still River and the Nashua.

Mention has been made of Wachusett Lake. Properly speaking, this cannot perhaps be considered as being in Princeton, inasmuch as about four fifths of its surface lie in the adjoining township of Westminster. Besides Wachusett Lake there is another called Quinnepoxet, which lies in the southwestern part of the township, a small portion of it being in Holden? It is smaller than its northern neighbor, covering only about seventy acres, but it is a very charming sheet of water.

A brief account of the geology of this region may perhaps prove interesting. In the eastern portion of Princeton the underlying rock is a kind of micaceous schist, and in the western is granite gneiss. The gneiss abounds in sulphuret of iron, and for this reason is peculiarly liable to undergo disintegration; hence the excellent character of soil in this portion of Worcester County where naked rock is seldom seen in place, except in case of the summits of the hills scattered here and there; and these summits are rounded, and show the effects of weathering. As we go westerly upon this gneiss range, and get into the limits of Franklin and Hampshire Counties, a larger amount of naked rock appears, the hills are more craggy and precipitous, and in general the soil is poorer. The three principal elevations in Princeton are mainly composed of gneiss. This variety of rock is identical with granite in

its composition, the distinctive point between the two being that gneiss has lines of stratification while granite has none. The rock of which Wachusett is mainly composed has rather obscure stratification, and hence may be called granite gneiss. What stratification there is does not show the irregularity that one would suppose would result from the elevation of the mountain to so great a height above the surrounding country; on the other hand the rock does not differ essentially in hardness from that in the regions below, and hence the theory that all the adjacent land was once as high as the summit of the mountain, and was subsequently worn away by the action of water and weather, is hardly tenable. The gneiss of this region is not especially rich in other mineral contents. Some fine specimens of mica have however been obtained from the summit of Wachusett. The only other extraneous minerals found there to any great extent is sulphuret of iron before mentioned. The common name of this mineral is iron pyrites, and being of a yellow color has in many localities in New England, in times past, caused a vast waste of time and money in the vain search for gold. It does not appear that the inhabitants of Princeton were ever thus deceived, though Whitney wrote in 1793: "Perhaps its bowels may contain very valuable hid treasure, which in some future period may be descried." In describing the summit of the mountain, he speaks of it as "a flat rock, or ledge of rocks for some rods round; and there is a small pond of water generally upon the top of it, of two or three rods square; and where there is any earth it is covered with blueberry bushes for acres round." The small pond and blueberry bushes are visible at present, or were a year or two ago at any rate, but the area of bare rock has increased somewhat as time went on, though the top is not as bare as is that of its New Hampshire brother, Monadnock, nor are its sides so craggy and precipitous.

The people of Princeton have always kept abreast of the times. From the first they were ardent supporters of the measure of the Revolution, and foremost among them in patriotic spirit was the Honorable Moses Gill, previously mentioned in the paper, who, on account of his devotion to the cause was called by Samuel Adams "The Duke of Princeton." Their strong adherence to the "state rights" principle led the people of the town to vote against the adoption of the Constitution of the United States; but when it was adopted they abided by it, and when the Union was menaced in the recent Rebellion they nobly responded to the call of the nation with one hundred and twenty-seven men and nearly twenty thousand dollars in money – exceeding in both items the demand made upon them. Nor is their record in the pursuits of peace less honorable, for in dairy products and in the rearing of fine cattle they have earned an enviable and well-deserved reputation. As a community it is cultured and industrious, and has ever been in full sympathy with progress in education, religion, and social relations.

But few towns in Massachusetts offer to summer visitors as many attractions as does Princeton. The air is clear and bracing, the landscape charming, and the pleasant, shady wood roads afford opportunities for drives through the most picturesque scenery. Near at hand is the lake, and above it towers Wachusett, It has been proposed to run a railroad up to and around the mountain, but thus far, fortunately, nothing has come of it. A fine road of easy ascent winds up the mountain, and on the summit is a good hotel, which is annually patronized by thousands of transient visitors.

The view from here is magnificent on a clear day. The misty blue of the Atlantic, the silver thread of the Connecticut, Mounts Tom and Holyoke, and cloud-clapped Monadnock, the cities of Worcester and Fitchburg – all these and many other beautiful objects are spread out before the spectator. But it cannot be described – it must be seen to be appreciated; and the throngs of visitors that flit though the town every summer affords abundant evidence that the love of the beautiful and grand in nature still lives in the hearts of the people.

Brief is the sketch of this beautiful mountain town, which is neither large nor possessed of very eventual history: but in its quiet seclusion dwell peace and prosperity, and its worthy inhabitants are most deeply attached to the beautiful heritage handed down to them by their ancestors.