

Then & Now - Early History of Princeton¹



In 1632, Massachusetts Bay Colony Governor Winthrop and a small group of men stood on “Boston Rock” in Waltham and caught their first glimpse of Mount Wachusett, Princeton’s most dominant geographic feature. Shortly thereafter, during the 1640s, the “Bay Path” was laid out to follow a series of native trails from eastern Massachusetts to the Connecticut Valley and points west. Using today’s geographic references, the Bay Path crossed through Princeton from east to south, following Houghton Road, Sterling Road/Route 62, and Merriam Road uphill and west to Mountain Road, and then downhill and south through Princeton Center and beyond, along Mountain Road and Worcester Road/Route 31. (Thus, Mountain and Worcester Roads in the Princeton Center Historic District actually predate, by more than a century, the founding of Princeton in 1759.)² Over time, the original footpath was gradually widened and improved to accommodate travel by horse, wagon, stagecoach, and finally automobile.

The first white men to claim lands in the vicinity of Mount Wachusett were a group of private investors, who in 1686 acquired from the Nipmuck tribe a twelve-square-mile section of wilderness land (including Mount Wachusett) known as the Naguag Purchase. However, despite the Bay Path’s potential to facilitate transportation, trade, and communications in this region, ongoing conflicts with native tribes precluded extensive settlement here until the early 18th century, when by act of the Massachusetts General Court in 1714 the entire Naguag Purchase was incorporated as the Town of Rutland.³

¹ Note: Francis Blake, in the preface to his 1915 history of Princeton, observed that very few records for Princeton survive from before 1770, and none at all prior to 1766. Secondary sources differ – sometimes significantly – in assigning dates to events and to building construction, especially for the 18th century. Those differences are noted where applicable throughout this section.

² Baumgardner (pp. 3, 16, 35) makes several references to the route of the Bay Path through Princeton (in its various incarnations from footpath to stagecoach route). Those descriptions were compared to Amos Merriam’s 1830 map of Princeton to identify the Bay Path along contemporary and present-day roads.

³ The 12-square-mile Naguag Purchase included lands that later became the towns of Rutland, Oakham, Barre, Hubbardston, portions of Princeton, and portions of Paxton.

In 1718 the “East Wing” sector of Rutland (which later became Princeton) was formally surveyed and subdivided into 48 lots containing about 237 acres each: thirty-three of these lots were numbered 1 to 33; twelve were identified by the letters A to M; and three others were designated as meadow lots.⁴ In about 1727, the Rev. Thomas Prince (1687-1771), pastor of the Old South Church in Boston, became interested in this area, which remained largely unoccupied by English colonists. Prince played an active role in re-surveying Rutland’s East Wing in 1734 for future settlement, and he also acquired about 3,000 acres (one-fifth of the East Wing) for himself. Although Rev. Prince never lived here, he was the East Wing’s largest landowner, and Princeton is his namesake.

Rutland’s East Wing finally saw its first white settler in 1742-1743, when Joshua Wilder of Lancaster successfully petitioned the Colonial government for a land grant for the purposes of building an inn for travelers headed west along the Bay Path from Lancaster. Wilder’s house and inn (no longer extant) stood on what is now Houghton Road, about 2 miles east of the present Princeton Center.⁵ Not long afterwards, in about 1748, Abijah Moore of Sudbury built a homestead, which also doubled as an inn and tavern, on the Bay Path about half a mile east of today’s Princeton Center.⁶

By the late 1750s, about 25 families had settled in the East Wing, which lay about 6 to 8 miles away from the center of Rutland. In 1759, recognizing that these families lived too far away from Rutland’s meetinghouse to allow for regular attendance at religious services, the Massachusetts General Court granted a petition to designate the East Wing and some adjacent farms (a total of about 19,000 acres) as the Prince Town District. This allowed residents to establish their own religious congregation and to build their own meetinghouse, but did not provide them with separate political representation in the state legislature.

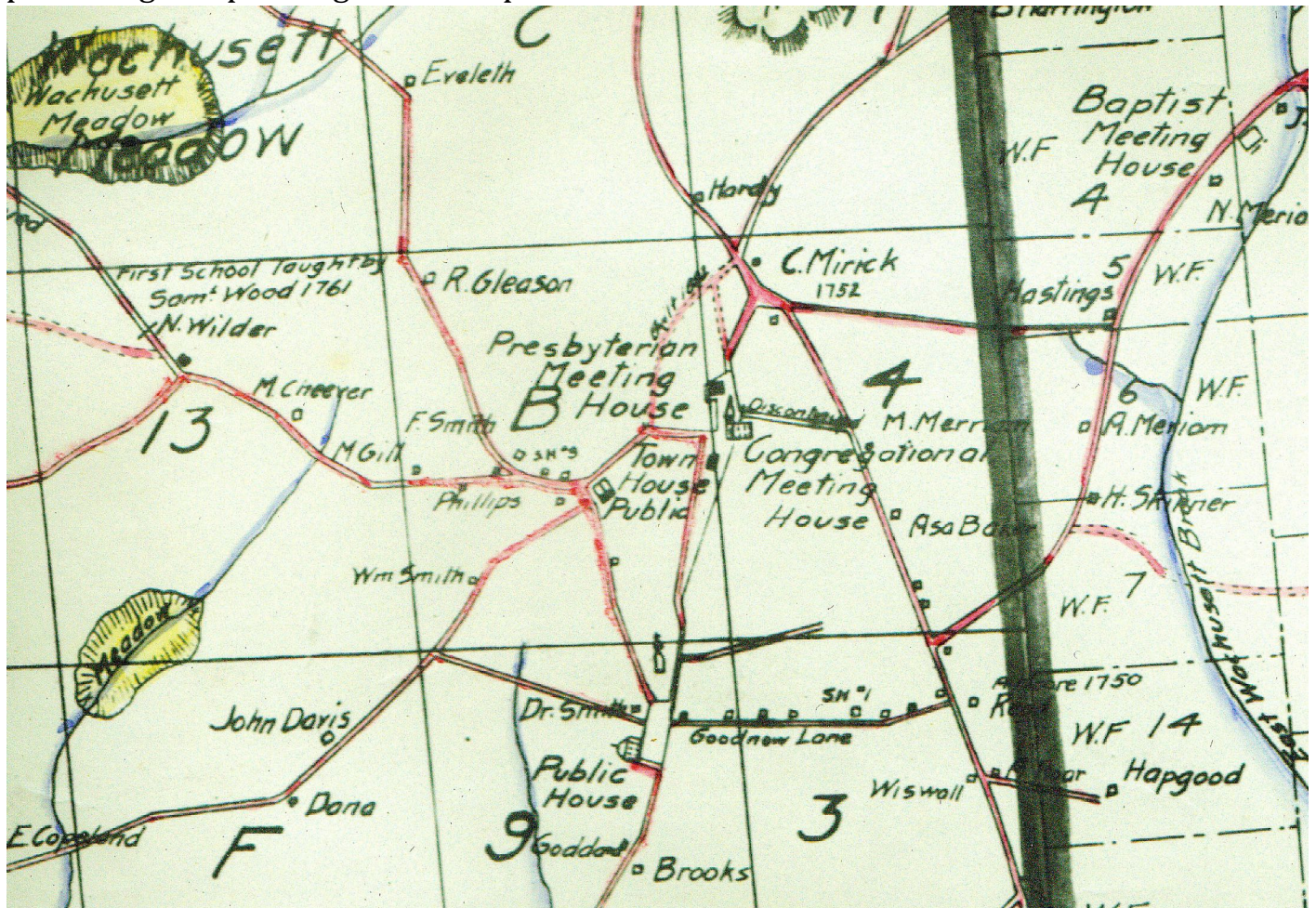
Despite the priority need to build a meetinghouse, it took Prince Town District residents two years to debate prospective locations before finally reaching consensus on a 5-acre hilltop site offered by John and Caleb Mirick on the east side of Mountain Road (between Merriam and Allen Hill Roads today). Construction on the meetinghouse began in late 1761, after the town voted to pay Abijah Moore a little over 66 pounds sterling to build the frame; it was raised on June 30, 1762. (The date 1762 can be seen

⁴ Blake, p. 23. These lots are also shown on Amos Merriam’s 1830 map of Princeton. That map seems to indicate that the principal routes of travel between Rutland and its East Wing, now Princeton, would be the roads known today as Calamint Hill Road and Brooks Station Road (outside this historic district).

⁵ Gregory cites Joshua Wilder’s 1742 petition (granted in 1743) to the General Court requesting permission to build an inn. However, Gilbert (p. 5) and Russell (pp. 6-9) both claim that Joshua Wilder arrived three years earlier, in 1739. Princeton Mass. 1759-1959 includes a map showing the cellar hole of Joshua Wilder’s home on Houghton Road.

⁶ Moore’s homestead still stands at 16 Merriam Road; see National Register nomination for the Russell Corner Historic District (2003).

in the pediment of the third meetinghouse, the present Congregational Church, at 14 Mountain Road.) By May 30, 1763 the building was complete enough (despite lacking finished floors, windows, or doors) to host its first district meeting. On August 12, 1764, the Congregational Society was formally organized; that same year, the main floor of the meetinghouse was laid, windows were put in, and regular worship services began to be held there. However, the building remained unfinished until about 1770, when final plastering and painting were completed.⁷



Amos Merriam's 1830 Map

Meanwhile, Princeton's first official road was constructed in 1762, following the route of the old Bay Path from Sterling Road westward along Merriam Road and uphill to Mountain Road, then southward along Mountain Road past the meetinghouse into today's Princeton Center, and continuing south along Worcester Road. This later became a County Road linking the towns of Winchendon and Worcester (it is so labeled on Amos Merriam's 1830 map of Princeton) and part of a regional stagecoach route through Princeton.

⁷ Blake, Vol. 1, pp. 126-137.

During the four years that lapsed between the founding of the Prince Town District in 1759 and the opening of the first meetinghouse in 1763, Abijah Moore's tavern, conveniently located on the principal transportation route through town about half a mile southeast of the meetinghouse (outside this historic district), became the center of the Prince Town District's social, religious, and political life: it not only provided hospitality and refreshment to local residents and travelers, but also hosted worship services and district meetings, including the very first town meeting on Christmas Eve, 1759.

Princeton's First Town Center⁸

Once the first meetinghouse opened in 1763, with its dual function as a house of worship and as the "town house" for local government, a recognized town center began to evolve around it on Meeting House Hill. In 1765, Princeton's wealthiest citizen, the Hon. Moses Gill, played a pivotal role in this evolution: he donated to the Town about 20 acres of land on the west side of Mountain Road across from the meetinghouse. On that donated land were soon established a common and a burying ground (ca. 1765), a town pound (1768), and a school (1774). This area remained the official "center" of Princeton for about eight decades, until the early 1840s.

Moses Gill (1733/34-1800) had come to Princeton through a family connection: his wife Sarah was a daughter of the Rev. Thomas Prince. Married in 1759, the same year the Prince Town District was established, the Gills took up residence in Princeton around 1767, living in a grand house on the east side of today's Worcester Road. (That house, which does not survive, stood outside the boundaries of this historic district). Although Sarah died in 1769, Gill apparently remained close to his father-in-law, for when the Rev. Prince died in 1771, Gill inherited Prince's vast estate in Princeton. Gill also served as Princeton's first representative to the Massachusetts General Assembly, and was later elected Lieutenant Governor; at the time of his death in 1800, he was serving as Acting Governor.⁹ His second wife, Rebecca Boylston, was the aunt of Ward Nicholas Boylston, who would play as important a role in forming the present Princeton Center in the early 19th century as his uncle had in shaping the original town center just a few decades earlier.

⁸ Note: much of the ensuing text is abridged from Susan Ceccacci's 1999 National Register nomination for the Princeton Center Historic District. That nomination provides an extensive and detailed historic context for the three properties presently in the historic district: Princeton Common, Bagg Hall (the present town hall), and the Goodnow Memorial Building (the present public library.)

⁹ Blake, Vol. 2: genealogy of Moses Gill.

year, Ward Nicholas Boylston made a gift of land to the Town for the “use and improvement of the present pastor of the Congregational Church and Society”.¹⁰ In about 1820 a Presbyterian church was constructed on the west side of Mountain Road, north of the cemetery and town pound; and a Baptist church was erected in 1828 on Mirick Road, a short distance northeast of the Congregational Church.¹¹ (Both of those sites lie outside this historic district.)

Of all of these civic and religious institutions in Princeton’s original town center, only the burying ground, now known as Meeting House Cemetery, and the Town Pound still survive today. The one-acre Meeting House Cemetery (see Photo #13), surrounded by stone walls, contains the graves of many of Princeton’s early settlers and their descendants, including such prominent names as Mirick, Howe, Russell, Moore, Brooks, Cheever, and Merriam. The Honorable Moses Gill and some of his family members are also buried here, as are three of Gill’s “Negro servants,” who all died in the 1770s and 1780s and may in fact have been slaves. The earliest surviving headstones are dated 1770; the latest, 1897; but over 200 of the 315 grave markers presently standing had been erected by 1838, when the meetinghouse was relocated to Princeton Center.

Originally, the town’s pound for stray animals was located in a barn on the property of Caleb Mirick, who served as Princeton’s first pound keeper from 1761-1762. Mirick’s homestead and tavern stood on the east side of Mountain Road a short distance north of the first meetinghouse (outside this historic district). In 1768, a few years after Moses Gill’s land donation, the town voted to construct a new pound of stone on the west side of Mountain Road, just north of the burying ground. It is not known how long this structure served as the town pound, but presumably it fell into disuse sometime after the early 1840s, when all town government functions relocated to Princeton Center. What remains of that structure today is an enclosure of stone walls roughly 5 feet tall and 30 feet square, lacking a roof or door (see Photo #12); its visibility from the street is a bit diminished by a stand of relatively new-growth trees now surrounding the pound.

Despite the presence of so many civic and religious institutions in Princeton’s first town center, no commercial businesses are known to have existed at the top of Meeting House Hill, perhaps because that location was relatively difficult to access, especially in winter. (The nearest business, Mirick’s Tavern, stood about a quarter mile away and even further uphill; nonetheless it was a popular stop for warmth and refreshment to those attending public meetings or worship services in the unheated meetinghouse.) Instead, in a more convenient location about half a mile south of the meetinghouse, near the intersection of several major roadways (Mountain Road, Worcester Road,

¹⁰ Princeton Center Historic District NR nomination (1999), Sec. 8, p. 7.

¹¹ Baumgardner, p. 32.

Hubbardston Road), a store, tavern, and blacksmith shop were erected by the late 18th century. Within that small business node were the seeds of a new town center.

Emergence of Princeton Center, 1770-1843

In 1771, the year after the meetinghouse was finally completed, Princeton was incorporated as an independent municipality. (Its first representative to the General Assembly was The Hon. Moses Gill.) Princeton's growth during the last half of the 18th century was remarkable: the population increased 400% in less than 30 years, from 284 residents in 1765 to 1,016 inhabitants (in 144 dwelling houses) in 1791.¹² In 1793, historian Peter Whitney observed of Princeton:

“In a little more than 30 years from its incorporation, Princeton is become very considerable among the towns of the [Worcester] county. It has surprisingly increased in number and in wealth. The land is ... exceedingly well adapted to pasturage and the growth of English grass. Hence the finest of beef is fatted here, and vast quantities of butter and cheese are produced ... we must judge the people are very industrious. Many of their houses are large and elegant.”¹³

Despite its population growth during this period, the pattern of settlement in Princeton continued to be large farmsteads scattered throughout the town's original 19,000 acres. The United States Direct Tax Census of 1798, part of which survives for Princeton, describes only a few buildings within one quarter or one half mile of the town center on Meeting House Hill; and Amos Merriam's 1830 map of Princeton shows that dwellings were still widely dispersed at that time. But in the years around the turn of the 19th century, several factors converged to increase the level of activity and the density of development in the area now known as Princeton Center.

A minor commercial node first formed in Princeton Center, at what is now the south end of Princeton Common, in the 1770s or 1780s, when William Richardson built a two-story store and tavern there. By 1785, a blacksmith shop, house, and barn stood opposite Richardson's store at the corner of today's Mountain and Gregory Hill Roads. Neither Richardson's store and tavern, nor the blacksmith shop, survives today (however, the ca. 1785 house still stands at 2 Mountain Road; see Photo #7). It is not known how long the blacksmith shop stayed in business, but William Richardson operated his store until his death in 1814, after which the business passed in succession to Reuben Brooks, John Brooks, and Pynson Blake. About 1826, the store building was

¹² Baumgardner, p. 24 and Whitney, pp. 233-234. Since 1771 the town boundaries have expanded three times: in 1810 the Town acquired a small portion of the town of Hubbardston; in 1838, an unincorporated tract known as “No Town,” lying between the towns of Fitchburg, Westminster, Leominster, and Princeton; and in 1870, a small strip previously belonging to Westminster.

¹³ Whitney, pp. 233-234.

moved a short distance west, to the corner of Hubbardston Road and Boylston Avenue; then, in 1830, Pynson Blake and his business partner Jonas B. Allen moved the retail business into the existing house at 2 Mountain Road. (The previous Blake & Allen store survived for another 12 years, housing other businesses including a shoe shop and a wheelwright's shop. It was demolished in 1842 and replaced by the present Ivory Wilder House at 1 Hubbardston Road; see Photo #3). In 1840, one of Blake & Allen's employees, David Hoyt Gregory, bought both the 2 Mountain Road store property and the retail business, which was renamed D.H. Gregory & Co. This continued to be a successful family business for 102 years, ensuring a constant level of commercial activity in Princeton Center. David Gregory's son, Josiah Gregory, became his father's business partner; Josiah's home built in 1874 stands next door to the store, at 6 Mountain Road (see Photo #7).

In 1822 Princeton Center acquired its second tavern and inn: the Wachusett House, built by John Brooks, Sr. at the intersection of Worcester Road and Boylston Avenue on the site of the present Dingman Park (moved ca. 1847 to 7 Boylston Avenue; see Photo #3). Brooks probably hoped to capitalize on expectations of increased traffic on two new regional transportation routes: the Royalston-Worcester stagecoach line, which began operating in 1820; and the Boston-Barre Turnpike, chartered in 1822 (finally completed in 1826, this toll road was short-lived, and reverted to a county road in 1833). Both of these regional routes utilized Mountain Road, Worcester Road, and Hubbardston Road to pass directly through or nearby Princeton Center. By 1830, as Amos Merriam's map shows, two additional roads had joined this intersection: Gregory Hill Road, connecting Mountain Road with the village of Russell Corner about half a mile to the east;¹⁴ and Boylston Avenue, leading southwest from Hubbardston Road.

These five roads converged at the south end of a large piece of open land that between 1838-1843 would become recognized as Princeton Common. The creation of Princeton Common, and the construction of a town hall and Congregational Church adjacent to it, happened largely through the efforts of Ward Nicholas Boylston (1747-1828). (Boylston Avenue in Princeton Center is named for him.) Born in Boston as Ward Hallowell, he changed his name on promise of a significant inheritance from a wealthy uncle, Nicholas Boylston Esq. (brother of Rebecca Boylston, who was the Hon. Moses Gill's second wife). After spending much of his adulthood living overseas, Ward Nicholas Boylston returned to Boston with his English wife Alicia in 1800, and in 1804 they began spending summers in Princeton. They lived for about 15 years in the old Gov. Gill mansion on Worcester Road, then in 1819 they built Boylston Villa nearby (outside this historic district).¹⁵

¹⁴ See also the Russell Corner Historic District NR nomination (2003).

¹⁵ MHC survey form for Boylston Burial Ground.

Ward Nicholas Boylston took a keen interest in Princeton's civic affairs and evidently developed a planning vision for the town's future growth and development, which he then helped to fulfill through a series of philanthropic gestures. In 1814, Boylston purchased a large tract of land in Princeton Center, extending up both sides of Mountain Road toward the top of Meeting House Hill. Four years later, in 1818, Boylston donated to the Town a piece of land on the east side of Mountain Road, across from the present Common, for the purposes of constructing a new town hall and a new Congregational Church. (Boylston's deed notes that "the severity of the [winter] season" could make the meetinghouse inconvenient for public worship.) He also gave the Town two other adjacent lots of land on Mountain Road "for the use and improvement of the present pastor of the Congregational Church," as well as \$500 toward the construction of a new town hall. A new home for the Rev. Samuel Clarke was promptly erected in 1819 at the north end of the present common (relocated in 1838 to 10 Mountain Road), but several decades passed before a new church and new town hall followed suit.

Boylston's actions suggest that he was actively trying to promote this area as a new town center for Princeton. Furthermore, when Boylston died in 1828, he was interred in a tomb on the west side of Hubbardston Road opposite the present Common (just north of 7 Hubbardston Road). Boylston's will bequeathed this burial ground, in which his wife, children, and grandchildren also rest, to the Town as well. Although Boylston's home on Worcester Road stood perhaps half a mile south of Princeton Common, the selection of this very visible site for a private cemetery may have been part of his planning vision for the town.¹⁶

Note that Ward Nicholas Boylston's various land donations all occurred around the periphery of the present Princeton Common. Research has not yet confirmed precisely how or when the Town acquired Princeton Common, but an 1839 engraving shows the Common in a form similar to its present triangular configuration, bounded by Mountain Road on the east, Hubbardston Road on the west, and a new meetinghouse on the north. The construction of a new Congregational Church in Princeton Center in 1838, followed shortly by a new Town Hall in 1842-1843, signaled the full emergence of Princeton Center as the civic and commercial heart of the town.

As Ward Nicholas Boylston's 1818 deed suggests, the original hilltop meetinghouse site could be very difficult to get to, especially in winter. In the late 1830s, when the second meetinghouse (built 1796) was approaching 40 years of age and needed to be replaced, a decision was made to move the meetinghouse to a more convenient location, half a mile downhill and closer to the growing business district in Princeton Center. To create an appropriate setting for the new meetinghouse, the two-story, Federal style Rev. Samuel Clarke House (1819) was moved eastward to its present location at 10 Mountain Road. A new, elegant, Greek Revival style church was then built "on the spot

¹⁶ Princeton Center Historic District NR Nomination (1999), Sec. 8, pages 4-8.

formerly occupied by Rev. Mr. Clarke's garden," overlooking Princeton Common from the north.¹⁷ (See Photo #8.)

In plan and design, the new church reflected a shift away from the traditional Congregationalist model (with its entrance and its pulpit on the wider sides of the building, bringing more worshippers into close proximity with the preacher), toward a more sophisticated, urban, Anglican model, with a tall steeple and its entrance and pulpit at the narrow ends of the building. The builder may have been David Brooks of Princeton, who is known to have built fourteen meetinghouses in Worcester County. This third meetinghouse of the Congregational Church contains elements of both previous meetinghouses. An oculus window from the first meetinghouse, inscribed with the date 1762 (the date the frame of the original building was raised), was placed in the pediment over the entryway, and a Revere bell from the second meetinghouse was installed in the steeple. Forty-six years later, in 1884, this church was relocated to its present site (14 Mountain Road) on the east side of the Common.

Meanwhile, as noted above, in 1818 Ward Nicholas Boylston had also provided land near Princeton Common on which to construct a new town hall. From 1763 until 1816, Princeton's seat of local government was also its primary house of worship: a building constructed and maintained by the taxpayers. But not all Princeton residents were members of the Congregationalist Society; as early as 1770, followers of the Baptist faith began to petition to be exempted from paying taxes to maintain the meetinghouse and support its Congregationalist pastors. By 1816, the Town decided to convert the 1789 Centre School on Meeting House Hill into a separate "town house," where town meetings could be held on religiously neutral ground. In this Princeton was far ahead of most other towns in Central Massachusetts; even after the Commonwealth adopted an amendment to its constitution separating church and state in 1833, many towns continued to hold both religious services and town meetings in the same meetinghouse. Princeton used the former Centre School as its town house until 1834, when it was sold to a John Stratton, who used a team of oxen to move it to a new location (now 15 Hubbardston Road); Stratton converted it to a private residence.¹⁸

Ward Nicholas Boylston's original gift to the Town of \$500 took 24 years to grow to a sufficient size to cover the cost of constructing a new town hall. This was because Boylston stipulated that the money was to be loaned out in \$50 to \$100 increments to "industrious young men of known good character," for a period of 3 years at an annual interest rate of 6%. By January of 1842 the fund had reached \$1,800, and a new town hall was finally constructed on the east side of Mountain Road across from Princeton

¹⁷ Blake, p. 165, quoted in the 1999 NR nomination for the Princeton Center Historic District, Sec. 8, p. 5.

¹⁸ The 1999 NR nomination for Princeton Center (Sec. 8, p. 10) states that the Centre District School was used as a town hall until 1842, when Boylston Hall was built on Princeton Common to replace it. However, Blake (p.215) reports the purchase and moving of the school building by John Stratton in 1834, as do the Princeton House Card files and the MHC survey form.

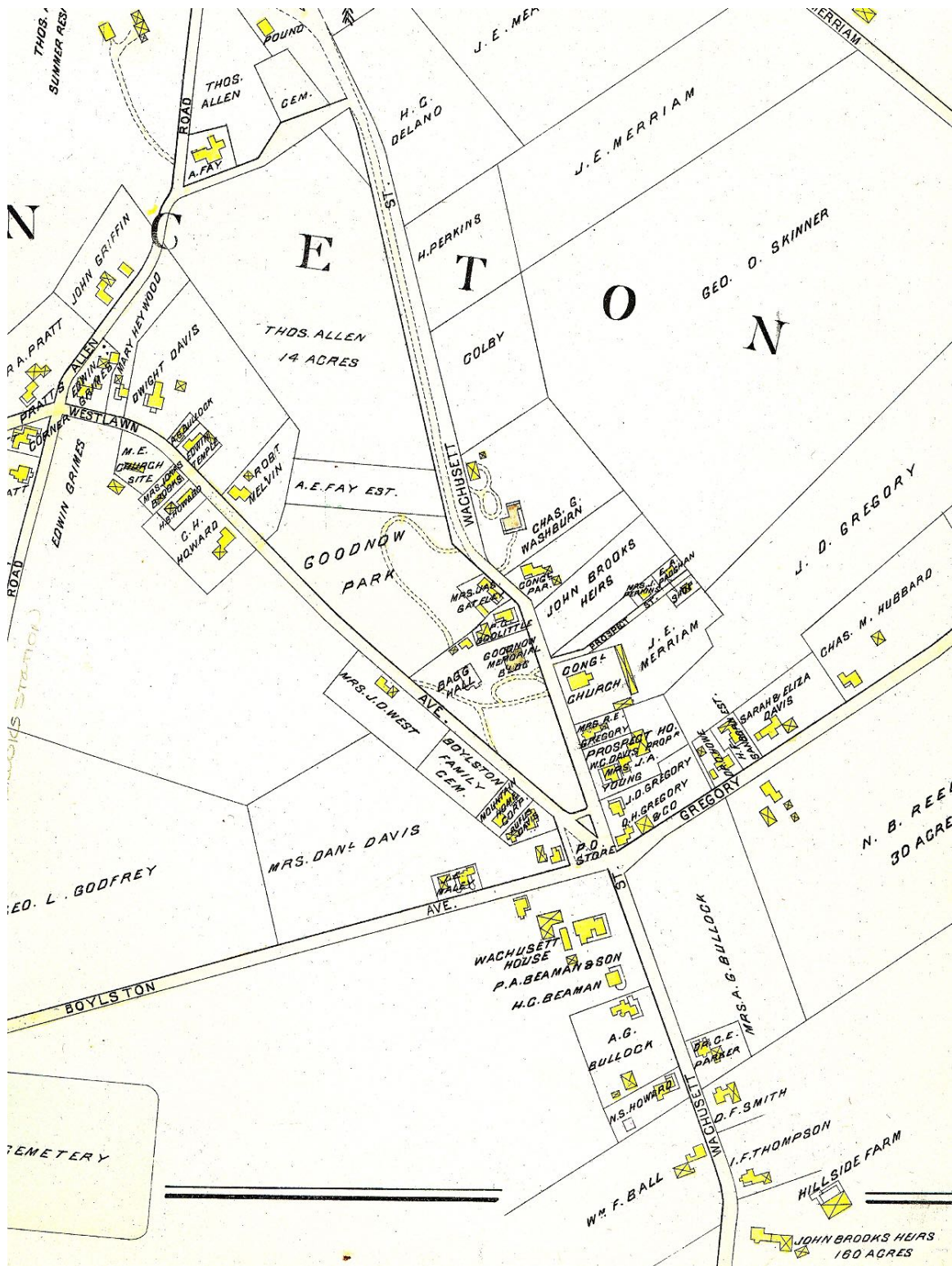
Common.¹⁹ Named Boylston Hall in honor of the donor, the new building hosted its first town meeting in 1843. A one-and-a-half story Greek Revival style building, Boylston Hall was oriented perpendicular to Mountain Road and the Common, and faced south toward its nearest neighbor, the Rev. Samuel Clarke House. Boylston Hall served as Princeton's town hall until destroyed by fire in 1883; its site is presently occupied by the 1838 Congregational Church (14 Mountain Road, moved in 1884).

A second church, for the local Baptist congregation, was built on the east side of Princeton Common, just south of the Rev. Samuel Clarke's House, in 1840. Like the Congregational Church, the Baptist Church was also a Greek Revival style, wooden structure with a tall steeple; it served its original purpose until 1860, and was then converted into a hotel. The name of the hotel was the Prospect House and eventually the Princeton Inn before it burned in 1923. This is now a vacant lot.

In a little more than three decades, Princeton Center had gone from a minor commercial node with a handful of businesses to a true town center. By 1845 the Common was surrounded by two Greek Revival churches, a Greek Revival town hall, a burial ground, two Colonial-era houses (15 Hubbardston Road, converted from a school, and 2 Mountain Road, converted into a store), one late Georgian house (1 Hubbardston Road), and a two-story Federal style hotel (now 7 Boylston Avenue). Five additional houses, all Greek Revival in style, had been constructed between 1824 and 1844 east of the Gregory Co. store (11, 13, 14, 15, and 21 Gregory Hill Road; see Photo #5). (Three of these Gregory Hill Road houses were built or occupied by Edson Beaman (1813-1892), a prolific builder who also constructed a Greek Revival style house at 77 Main Street in the village of East Princeton; and a fourth was built by Edson's brother Alfred (1806-1835). Edson and Alfred Beaman's first cousin, Phineas Beaman, was the proprietor of the second Wachusett House hotel.)²⁰ Five local roads converged at the Common's south end, facilitating travel within Princeton and to and from other surrounding communities. Princeton Center was poised to take advantage of the next major phase of the town's development.

¹⁹ Princeton Center Historic District NR nomination (1999), Sec. 8, pp. 10-11.

²⁰ Blake, Vol. 2, pp. 18-20; MHC survey forms for East Princeton village.



Sources:

United States Department of the Interior National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places for PRINCETON CENTER HISTORIC DISTRICT

Blake, Francis Everett. History of the Town of Princeton 1759-1915: Vol. 1 Pages 299-301, Narrative, Princeton, Mass. Town of Princeton, 1915.