

A brief history of Willis Woods

For thousands of years Native American peoples inhabited the lands in northeastern Massachusetts. Specifically, these lands and waters in today's Essex County were fished and farmed by the Naumkeag, Pennacook, Pawtucket, Agawam and Wonasquam tribes.

In the 1600's, when the European colonists began their arrivals in New England, coastal towns such as Salem and Lynn were rapidly growing population centers. Until it became a separate district from Lynn in 1782, Lynnfield was part of Lynn.

Thomas Willis was born in 1582 in the village of Fenny Compton, Warwickshire, England to a family of much property and means. He received his B.A. degree from St. John's College, University of Oxford in 1602 and his M.A. degree in 1606. On leaving college he became schoolmaster at Isleworth, England.

In 1630, Thomas Willis, his wife Mary Tomlin of Gloucestershire, England, and two sons arrived in Lynn, Massachusetts. The reason for Mr. Willis coming to Massachusetts is thought to have been his leaning to Puritanism and persecution of that sect, and the political tensions surrounding the reign of King Charles I.

Colonists of means were often enticed to advance the early settlements and towns in New England with gifts of large land grants. In 1638 the town of Lynn appointed a committee to divide its lands, and Thomas Willis received a land grant of 500 acres, the largest at that time.

Willis was appointed as a member of the General Court on May 14, 1634. These courts were responsible for admitting additional freemen, choosing officers in an annual election, settling the necessary forms of government, and making laws and ordinances for the Massachusetts Bay Colony, provided they were not contrary to the laws of England.

Willis also became a shareholder in the original American ironworks in Lynn (known today as the Saugus Iron Works), which operated from 1646 to approximately 1670. In 1643, John Winthrop, Jr., the son of John Winthrop, the first Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, had traveled to England to secure workmen and investors for commencing the iron works at Lynn.

Descendants of Thomas Willis carried forth the blast furnace and iron forge manufacturing and business knowledge to build many successful enterprises throughout towns in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Jersey. The family's iron works businesses continued on for nearly 300 years.

Along with his wife and their second son (Rev. Thomas Willis, born 1619) Thomas Willis returned permanently to England and to his former teaching position in Isleworth, England in 1646. There he published two books, "Vestibulum Linguae Latinae" in 1651, and "Phraseologia Anglo Latina" in 1655. Records show that he died around 1660.

There is no record that confirms why Willis returned to England, although it has been speculated that the easing of religious and political tensions in England may have been the primary reason for him and many other New England colonists. The New England Historic Genealogical Society refers to the peak years from 1629 to 1640 as the "Great Migration"- years when the Puritan crisis in England reached its height. The Massachusetts Bay Colony, chartered in 1629 by a group of moderate Puritans, represented both a refuge and an opportunity for Puritans to establish a "Zion in the wilderness". During the ten years that followed, over twenty thousand men, women, and children left England to settle permanently in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In 1640, when religious and political tensions became more relaxed in England, attention was redirected from the New World back to the old, effectively resulting in a net migration back to England. Thomas Willis arrived in New England and returned to England during these peak periods of migration.

Willis' 500-acre land parcel – described in the Salem Registry of Deeds documents as a "farme" was inherited by his daughter Elizabeth Willis and placed in the name of her husband Reverend John Knowles of Watertown. Knowles sold the land to Isaac Hart on December 31, 1673. The land was subsequently subdivided into numerous parcels that were gifted or sold over the next 200+ years.

Sources - Excerpts from the following print and online sources:

History of Lynn, Essex County, Massachusetts, Including Lynnfield, Saugus, Swampscott and Nahant. 1629 – 1864 by Alonzo Lewis and James R. Newhall

A History of the Willis family of New England and New Jersey and their ancestors: comprising the families of Farrand, Ball, Kitchell, Cook, Ward, Fairchild, Plume, Bruen, Smith, Treat, Pierson, Crane, Cooper, Sanford, Sheafe and others; to which is added a history of the family of John Howard, esq., of Richmond, Virginia, and the Harris and Macleod families of Georgia, by Willis, Charles E. (Charles Ethelbert), 1917.

<https://archive.org/details/historyofwillisf00will/page/n8/mode/1up?view=theater>

Abandoning America, Life-Stories from Early New England, by Susan Hardman Moore, 2013

<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/alumni-oxon/1500-1714/pp1626-1654>

<https://www.americanancestors.org/browse/publications/ongoing-study-projects/great-migration/new-englands-great-migration>

<https://www.geni.com/people/Thomas-Willis/6000000017536732159>

<https://www.geni.com/people/Isaac-Hart/332749065460012798>

<https://www.sec.state.ma.us/arc/arccol/colmac.htm>