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RHODE ISLAND YEARBOOK



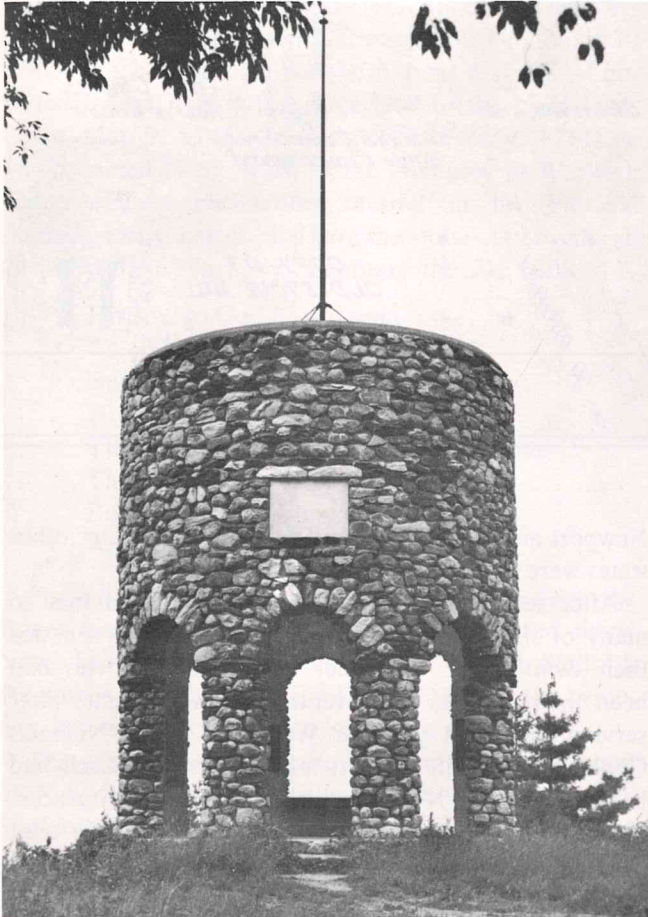
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II The Berkshires 1762

New Providence

BY FLORENCE PARKER SIMISTER



Surprise atop a Berkshire hill.

IN the northwest corner of Massachusetts, on the top of a hill called Stafford's, facing Mount Greylock and surrounded by the Berkshires, is a sight that is startling to Rhode Islanders. It is a monument and it stands alone there — a copy (not a replica) of the Old Stone Mill in Newport. There is no mystery about *this* building as there is about the one in Newport. A plaque on the outside of it tells the story: "Erected in memory of the pioneers and patriots of New Providence. 1927."

In the center of the floor of this building is a sarcophagus in which a man named Colonel Joab Stafford is buried and cut into the stone on the top of this are the words: "In memory of Colonel Joab Stafford who fought and bled in his country's cause at the Battle of Bennington August 14, 1777; who departed this life

November 22, 1801 aged 72 years. He descended to the tomb with an unsullied reputation."

What was New Providence? Who was Colonel Stafford that a memorial should be erected to him, a mountain named for him and the road up the mountain be called Stafford's Hill Road? The story begins in 1762.

In that year a vast tract of land was purchased in that section of Massachusetts by Nicholas Cooke of Providence (Governor of Rhode Island from 1775 to 1778) and Joseph Bennett of Coventry. Land in that corner of Massachusetts was cheap because the boundary had not been fixed and people were afraid to buy there. Cooke and Bennett bought the land on speculation. Cooke never emigrated from Providence but Bennett did. The two men hired Joab Stafford, a former sea-captain of Coventry, to survey the land. He mapped it into thirty-three farms and laid out five roads radiating from a center at the summit of the hill that came to be known as New Providence, later Stafford's Hill Settlement. Stafford became the first resident in the community and bought the first farm.

The Baptists in Coventry at that time were discontented. They and everyone else in Coventry had been asked to pay taxes for the support of the Congregational Church and minister and they felt the state was having far too much to do with their religious observances. They wanted to be away somewhere in their own settlement so they could govern themselves to suit themselves. It was this religious difficulty at home plus the chance for land speculation that drew them to the Berkshires.

They, therefore, packed all their household goods and followed Joab Stafford to Massachusetts. Most of them walked; a few had ox-sleds or carts. (Horses were a luxury not many could afford.) Sometimes relatives took them as far as the Connecticut River. From there they struck out through the forest, following Indian trails and river courses, blazing trees for those who would come later or following the marked trails made by those who had preceded them. In 1766 the first of them reached a hill about three miles from the present village of Cheshire which they called New Providence Hill partly in remembrance of their former home and partly because of the providence of God in making their undertaking a success. This hill, later also called Stafford's Hill Settlement because Colonel Staf-

ford kept the village store, post office, and tavern and had a farm there, is still, in 1968, known as Stafford's Hill after the Colonel who was one of the principal figures in the migration.

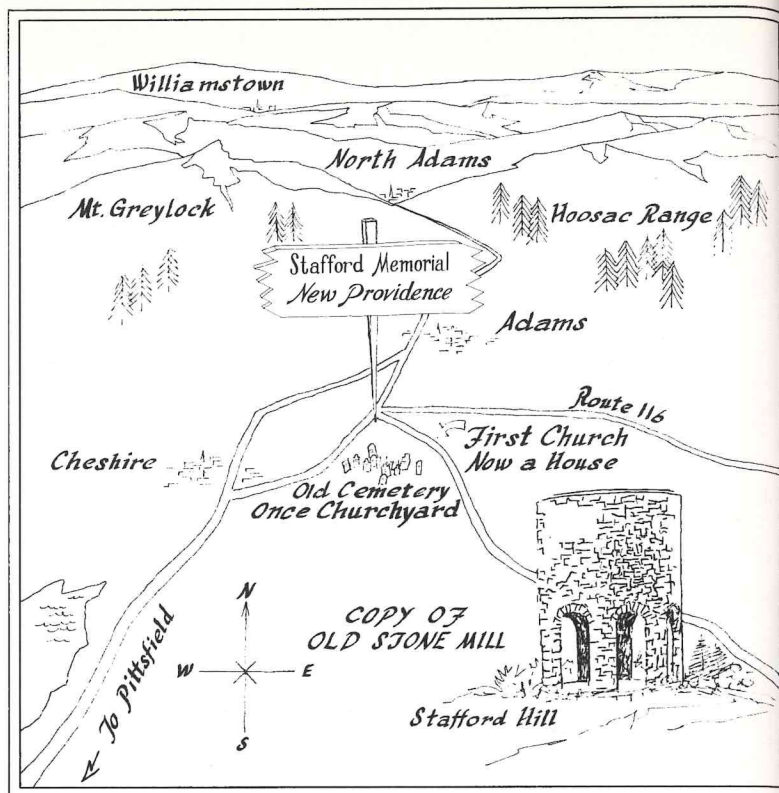
Most of the pioneers were Baptists, primarily from Coventry; but after them came Baptists from Scituate, Middletown, Portsmouth, Warwick, Providence and other places in Rhode Island. Later came Quakers and other sects.

Colonel Stafford had been a member of the Rhode Island General Assembly, representing Coventry, in 1762. That assembly had met in Newport and historians feel he had become familiar with the Old Stone Mill while in the city-by-the-sea and that is why a copy of it was chosen as the form for the memorial.

There is an interesting account of how he brought his wife to New Providence. After he mapped the tract of land, he made the first purchase and built a house. Then he returned to Providence for his family. As they traveled back to the Berkshires his wife kept questioning him about her new home. He would not tell her about it, but, as they approached the new settlement, he did ask how she liked the various houses along the road. One, in particular, pleased Mrs. Stafford. The Colonel stopped to let her admire it and she is supposed to have said, "Oh, if I could only live there I would be perfectly satisfied." At that Colonel Stafford turned into the enclosure and told her they had reached home.

Other stories are told about the first settlers. One, Deacon Munroe, in crossing a bridge on his way to New Providence from Providence, Rhode Island, had an accident and all his possessions fell into the river. He arrived in the new settlement penniless but lived to become one of the most prosperous and respected members of the new community.

Another settler, by the name of Wells, a poor boy from Cranston, Rhode Island, married Frances Brown, daughter of a well-to-do man. The father did not approve of the marriage and so the young couple set out for New Providence riding *one* horse with no worldly goods at all. They cleared their piece of land and put up a house. Wells farmed by day and made shoes by firelight. His wife took in sewing. Eventually they added farm to farm and when Mr. Wells died his estate was one of the largest in Berkshire County. The main street through the present village of Cheshire is still called Wells and his house still stands at the corner of Wells and Jenks Roads. There were people named Carpenter in the new settlement and Wilmarth, Brown, Barker, Angell, Whipple, Tibbitts, Briggs and Jenks to mention a few. They came from Coventry, Providence, Warwick, Scituate, Middletown, Cumberland,



Newport and other places in Rhode Island. Later other states were represented, too.

After several conferences the settlers found that so many of them came from Coventry that they sent for their own pastor, the Elder Peter Werden, who had been their minister in Coventry for twelve years after serving for seven years at Warwick. When Nicholas Cooke and Joseph Bennett learned that a church had been founded at New Providence they gave fifty acres on the northern slope of New Providence hill in trust as a ministerial lot or glebe land "for the support of a preacher of the Anabaptist denomination."

The Baptists did not build their first church there but on a little slope facing west. We are told by one historian that a dark solemn spruce stood in the background. That first church was organized in August, 1769. When, a few years later, the building fell out of repair, it was taken apart and moved up to the glebe lands farther up the hill. A holiday was declared for the whole village of New Providence, a barrel of rum was set out and, according to which account you read, either thirty pair of oxen or one hundred or one hundred and thirty dragged the church up the hill. There it was made over into two tenements and the rent from these (since the house was on glebe land) went to the support of the minister. This former church still stands but the land is no longer glebe land.

Although the first church was removed, the graveyard was not and there on a sunny day in April, 1968 we opened the wrought iron gate and entered the burial ground. It is on Jenks Road, named for a former resi-

dent of Cumberland, Rhode Island just off Wells Road, named for a former Cranston resident. Wilmarths, Wells, Fisks, Masons and Hathaways were all around us. Thistle and mullein grew there. The stones were nearly all of white marble with one or two of red sandstone. We found the grave we had come to see with no trouble and read the inscription: "Here lies the body of Peter Werden, the Pastor of the Church of Christ in Cheshire. He was born June 6, 1728. Converted by the mighty power of God to the Lord Jesus Christ May 9, 1748. In the month of May, 1751, he was ordained to the work of the Almighty in Warwick and continued measurably faithful in his Pastoral charge to the Close of his (here the stone-cutter omitted the word *life*) which was February the 21, 1808.

His soul to God he w'd send
To cry for Grace for foe and friend
But blessed be the God of love
His soul is now with Christ above
This crumbling sculpture keeps the clay
That used to house his noble mind
But at the resurrection day
Another body he shall find.

For many years this graveyard was neglected: the stones leaned in all directions and cows grazed there. Now, through the gift of a descendant of Joab Stafford, the stones have been repaired and reset and the cemetery has been enclosed by a wall with a gate in it.

The second meeting house was built on the summit of New Providence or, as it now came to be called, Stafford's Hill, and for many years was attended by a thriving congregation. When Werden arrived the roll call numbered thirteen. By 1772 twenty-three additional names were added. It has been said of Werden that "for dignity of nature, soundness of judgment, meekness of temper and unwearied labors in the ministry but few have equalled him in this age." Not only did the church thrive but the village did, too. New Providence was once the largest settlement in the Berkshires, "... the religious and mercantile center for the territory of several hundred square miles."

Not many years after the founding of the church the Revolutionary War broke out and there was wild excitement in New Providence. When the British became active in the area five hundred men marched from the training ground below the present monument on Stafford's Hill to defend Bennington. A plaque on one of the pillars of the stone mill memorial tells the story: "From here on August 12, 1777 the Independent Company of Silver Greys was organized from the train bands and alarm lists of East Hoosuck, New Providence, Lanesborough and Gageborough. On

August 17 commanded by Colonel Joab Stafford who rallied all the men in New Providence they marched from this hill to Bennington and rendered valiant service in the battle of August 10th." He (Colonel Stafford) was wounded in the battle and was brought home on a litter and carried up the length of Stafford's Hill Road to his house on the summit.

These people from Rhode Island brought with them not only religious and patriotic fervor; they brought skills with them, too, and Rhode Island customs. Many of the houses were built in the style of Rhode Island houses — a long, low, story-and-a-half with hand-split clapboards and hewn beams and a covered outside entrance to the cellar. They brought wild flowers with them: pinks and southern arrow wood and others. Before they built their gristmills, they pounded their corn in an iron mortar with a pestle for they carried with them their appetite for mush and Rhode Island jonny-cakes. They brought with them the secret of cheese-making and there were cheese factories in the neighborhood and cheese-box factories, too.

Baptists in those days all seem to have been Jeffersonians and to demonstrate their loyalty the women made a mammoth cheese. It was drawn from New Providence to Hudson, New York, sent to Washington by boat and presented to Jefferson as a New Year's gift. It weighed 1235 pounds. Later another cheese was sent to President Andrew Jackson. This one, the story goes, was so strong by the time it was shipped that it walked from Baltimore to Washington.

In 1810 there were, among other businesses, a cabinet shop, a forge, two stores, a wagon-maker's shop, a sawmill, a sandmill, tanneries, a trip-hammer used for making scythes, hoes and farming tools. Some women wove broadcloth and woolen fabrics. The greatest contribution, however, was made by one Alden Potter of Rhode Island, who began to manufacture cotton-spinning machinery. He had learned his trade in the Slater Mill in Pawtucket, Rhode Island but when he constructed his machinery in the Berkshires there was one fault he could not correct. And so, one day, he mounted his horse and rode back to Pawtucket. He went to visit his old friends at the mill and slyly watched the machinery working. He discovered the error he had made and went back to New Providence. His spinning jennies went into the twenty-first cotton factory in the United States. Later, when a cholera epidemic broke out, Alden Potter and many others left New Providence for the safety of Newburgh, New York. Once there, though, he remembered that someone might steal his invention for he had left his machinery all set up. He rode back to New Providence, took the machinery apart and scattered it. Then he returned to



Here in the quiet Berkshires was once the village of New Providence.

Newburgh and there contracted cholera and died.

Potter Hill, to the west of Stafford's Hill, is named for George Potter, doubtlessly a descendant of Alden Potter of Portsmouth, Rhode Island. George Potter has his own monument on the road from Pownal, Vermont to Troy, New York, built as a mark of esteem by those who knew him.

Thanks to Alden Potter, the machinery manufacturing business became established and there are still machine companies in North Adams. Carding and fulling mills prospered, water looms were installed and the textile business burgeoned in Adams, North Adams, Pittsfield and the surrounding country.

By 1780 the Plantation of New Providence became part of the town of Adams. The pioneers began to date their letters from Adams and all deeds after this were made at Adams. Also the church at New Providence was referred to as the First Baptist Church of Adams. In 1783, however, the part of Adams that had been New Providence became part of Cheshire.

Gradually, while all these absorptions were taking place and businesses established, people began to leave New Providence or Stafford's Hill Settlement. The village of Cheshire about three miles away became more popular. By 1843 the church at the top of Stafford's Hill was abandoned. It had stood there for over fifty years, even while the houses around it tumbled down

one after the other. "Neglected and forsaken, it stood upon the highest point, a landmark for miles and miles around. The shutters high up in the belfry tower flapped and banged in the blasts of November, the great doors creaked and groaned, the pulpit from which the 'Arduous Werden' preached . . . was dusty and cobwebbed . . . the old church had departed. It could not be rebuilt by empty fields and wind-tossed trees, so it was torn down . . ." Soon only two poplar trees marked the site. The young people went where there were larger mills and more money and attended new churches at Cheshire and Adams. This is the reason there are so many gravestones with Rhode Island names on them in the Maple Street Cemetery in Adams. There were cotton mills at Adams as early as 1817 and water looms at Cheshire Harbor in 1827.

Another reason for the abandonment of New Providence was that Mother Ann Lee, the Shaker, visited the settlement in an attempt to proselytize. The residents of the village resented her visit and tried to mob her. She escaped, although not before she had converted Mr. Joseph Bennett. He had been a guiding spirit of the community from its inception but after this he left the settlement. He is buried in the Shaker cemetery in Watervliet, New York. By this time, too, Colonel Stafford was dead and his influence was no longer felt. With the first settlers gone the new generation left the hill for other villages in the area.

A plaque on one of the pillars of the copy of the Old Stone Mill on Stafford's Hill commemorates the First Church of Christ in New Providence and the settlers: "Organized by the pioneers August 28, 1769. It was a daughter of the communion founded by Roger Williams and became the mother church of the Baptist denominations in Western Massachusetts." There follows a list of the brethren and sisters from Coventry, a history of the settlement: "The First Meeting House was built about 1774 and stood in the neighboring cemetery. In 1794 the church had 194 members living within a radius of 10 miles. This meeting house was abandoned in 1817 and in 1820 was removed to the Glebe Farm on this hill for a ministerial house. The second meeting house was dedicated January 1, 1818 and stood a few rods east of this spot. It fell into disuse about 1850 . . ." There is a list of those recommended and received from distant places, those received and baptized in 1772, 1773, 1774 and some of the more than five hundred additional members of later date.

Another tablet in the memorial commemorates Freemasonry in Massachusetts; one is from Vermont to the patriots of Berkshire County; one from New York, a tribute to Massachusetts; there is a copy of the petition for liberty to form the company of Silver Greys; one

to the memory of Colonel Joab Stafford, first settler of New Providence and commander of the Silver Greys in the battle of Bennington: "This gravesite and monument built in the likeness of an original gristmill in Newport, Rhode Island was deeded by the Massachusetts Society Sons of the American Revolution to the Sarah Deming Society Children of the American Revolution whose members restored and rededicated it July 1, 1967."

The stone mill overlooks the old training field and is near the site of Stafford's home, tavern and the second church. The land for the memorial was given by Jabez and Henry Jenks, descendants of the first Jenks from Cumberland, Rhode Island.

The first church still stands and is used as a tenement but is in tumbledown condition. Mr. Wells' house remains in a fine state of repair. Mr. Bennett's burned down many years ago. Of the five old cemeteries that are located around Stafford Hill only the one in the former churchyard is easy to find. Many of the gravestones have disappeared from these cemeteries and here and there in the stone walls one sees a piece of dressed marble that could be part of a tombstone from one of them or a stone that could have been part of a fireplace or chimney. Here and there, too, a cellar hole or a deep depression near a wall that could have been a cellar can be found. The five roads Joab Stafford laid out are obscured.

Men working the land occasionally plow up bits of crockery and once a farmer unearthed a heap of clamshells. Perhaps a new arrival to the settlement brought with him enough clams from home to make a Rhode Island clambake.

The committee which decided that the monument here should be a copy of the Old Stone Mill in Newport claimed that it typified the origin of the emigrants but the first pioneers were from Coventry and Warwick not from Newport. Later people did come from Middletown, Portsmouth and Newport. However, Joab Stafford had been a member of the General Assembly sitting at Newport. He, at least, must have been familiar with the Old Stone Mill and he was easily the foremost citizen of New Providence.

Many of the first settlers became the ancestors of famous people. Among these was Dr. David Cushing of Stafford's Hill Settlement whose great-grandson became Dr. Harvey Cushing, the famous brain surgeon. Another, Daniel Read, became the grandfather of Susan B. Anthony, the American suffragist.

On the April day we visited the area we stood near the stone mill and looked around. For 360 degrees the Berkshire Hills were visible. Across the magnificent Hoosac valley from the memorial Mount Greylock

reared up, the highest point of land in Massachusetts. Hardly a house was visible. Except for an abandoned covered-over well nearby we would never have guessed that houses ever stood here. And yet, animal bones, crockery, clamshells had been turned up by plowshares. And there, behind us was the memorial marking the site of what was once a most flourishing village, the religious, social and business center for the whole area. Below, in Cheshire, was Wells Road and Jenks Road and, leading up to where we stood, was Stafford's Hill Road — all named for Rhode Islanders.

We looked down Stafford's Hill Road and remembered that we had read that once this long street was lined with houses and stores on both sides. In 1968 not a vestige of the village of New Providence remained on top of the wind-swept hill. Only a signpost 1600 feet below informed the traveler that "Stafford Memorial, New Providence" was up the hill.

On the pillars of the stone mill were plaques with Rhode Island names on them and Rhode Island names were also on the gravestones in the once-upon-a-time churchyard.

History seemed almost unbelievable when we stood on the very ground where the settlement had been located. And the most amazing sight to Rhode Islanders, visible from miles away, is the copy of the Old Stone Mill in Newport, erected as a memorial to Joab Stafford and the immigrants from Providence to New Providence, on top of the now lonely hill in the Berkshires.

