Gutter: Its Rise and Fall

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The Town of Longmeadow, Massachusetts lies on the east bank of the Connecticut River; it is bounded on the north by Springfield and on the south by the Connecticut state line. Its name appears for the first time on a deed drawn up at the close of King Phillip's war, by which the resident Indians "sold" a good deal of land "To Mr. William Pynchon and others." This "longe meddowe" first settled by white men around 1644, is now a suburban residential town – a very proper New England community with a white meetinghouse and a group of fine colonial houses facing out on a long green common shaded by elms and sycamores.

Like all proper New England towns, Longmeadow has its annual town meeting. The one which took place on a cold night in February of 1954 had a special significance for the student of place names; and I attended, though I had to sit among the disenfranchised in the balcony because I had lived there less than the required year. The moderator read from the town warrant, called for motions, kept the discussion in order, and conducted the voting. It was some time before he reached Article 34: "To see if the town will change the name of *Grassy Gutter Road* to *Remy Road* or *Wilkin Road* or take any other action relative thereto."

A little more than a hundred years after the name *Grassy Gutter* made its first formal appearance, it had become an undesirable; or, let us say more gently that it seemed to fall somewhat short of prevailing aesthetic standards. Consider it in the context of a town with the gracious name of Longmeadow, many of its streets so properly named for early settlers like Bliss, Cooley, and Williams; and others with names suggestive of tradition, nature, peace, and good real estate promotion such as Wheelmeadow Drive, Druid Circle, Laurel Street, and Forest Glen Road. There were present at the town meeting that night those to whom it was patently clear that a name as homely as Grassy Gutter Road could no longer

be tolerated in the midst of this calculated pastorale. To some of them, its very existence was a surprise, for the fairly short, undeveloped road had little public notice until a site fronting on it was chosen for a new high school.

One enthusiastic supporter of the change thought Grassy Gutter was a *nasty* name and said just that, urging further that since everyone was aware of the connotations of *Gutter*, it seemed sufficiently disgraceful that the word had been legally attached to the town and its people for all these years. Now, surely, made aware of its monstrous, offending presence, they must rise in indignation and bring about its fall. Arguments were presented with considerable ardor; the two new names were separately proposed and discussed, and the voting was at hand.

But even as the moderator cleared his throat to put the motion before the voters, a dignified gentleman rose and asked permission to speak. (He was, I later discovered, a lawyer to whom case-pleading was no new experience.) It was an eloquent and impassioned plea – not only for the retention of the name of *Grassy Gutter Road*, but for a halt in the general trend which was seeking to modernize and sophisticate the colorful and picturesque names the New England landscape had worn since "our Pilgrim forefathers" bestowed them. He was brief, but he was earnest and forceful. A mingled murmur of amusement and interest passed through the crowd, and what had seemed at first to be only one more street-name changing petitioned by residents seeking a shorter or more attractive name had become an issue; and it involved some very positive and thoughtful attitudes. When the vote came, Grassy Gutter Road and its champion were victorious. The townspeople went on to approve appropriations for mundane items such as Japanese beetle control, a swimming pool, and new pavements, and the sons of tradition and admirers of picturesque place names relaxed and considered the world with renewed pleasure; a fallen gutter had been saved.

Even among those who knew of its existence, there were probably few at the town meeting who were aware that the name of the road was taken from a bordering stream called *Grassy Gutter*; they may not have suspected that here was a name as old and tradition-rich as Longmeadow itself, or that this very term *gutter* had been soberly and respectably attached to place names in their own Connecticut Valley for well nigh 300 years. It was used, typically, to describe

a small stream flowing between high, eroded banks of its own making, and amounting to a mere trickle in dry seasons but a torrent in the time of melting snows.

Let us now consider this New England gutter in terms of its provenience and habitat, and try to find the factors involved in its fall from grace. It is most remarkable that a word used and accepted by the earliest settlers – folk traditionally noted for a sombre and literal turn of mind – should be shunned and disgraced ten generations later, perhaps even by some ancestor-conscious descendants of the very people who once used it.

Gutter as a generic term for a narrow watercourse, usually a small one flowing into a brook, is labeled obsolete by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, where the first citation for this sense is from Holland's (1601) translation of Pliny. The next pertinent reference is from New England – the Providence, Rhode Island *Record* in 1675. A passage from Robert Burns' *Holy Fair* that reads: „swankies young ... are springin' o'er the gutter" is not unequivocal evidence for the idea of a small stream, but does not entirely exclude the possibility. Trumbull's classic *History of Connecticut* (1797) contains a reference to "brooks and gutters," implying that these two features, while similar, were still readily distinguishable. Thoreau, in *Cape Cod*, written in 1855, says: "...we crossed a brook called *Jeremiah's Gutter*," from which we might conjecture that *gutter* as the generic element in this place name conflicted with his own personal term for the same sort of stream – brook. Similarly, a Midwesterner in New England might say "We crossed a creek called Roaring Brook," because the stream itself, regardless of its local name or its legal and established place name, remains, to the speaker, generically a creek.

Two further quotations noted in the *Dictionary of American English* support this sense of the word *gutter* and also establish it in New England: one is from the Amherst, Massachusetts *Record* of 1770; the other from Hawthorne's *House of Seven Gables*. The available literary evidence, oddly enough, shows the term more common in colonial America than in England itself; it is noted in Halliwell's *Dictionary of Archaisms and Provincialisms*, and in Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary* where, quoting provincial glossaries, the entry pictures it as "a narrow watercourse, generally flowing into a brook," and "a small stream of water, deep and narrow." An article in the *Fishing Gazette* from Kent in 1899

describes "... marshes ... intersected with innumerable dykes or gutters choke full of weeds." Also noted are the place names *Hope Gutter* and *Grubb's Gutter* in nineteenth century Shropshire writings. Perhaps the most literary gutter in all England, however, was Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "dear gutter of Stowey"; in a chapter of John Livingston Lowes' *The Road to Xanadu* named in its honor, we find this rhapsodic excerpt from one of the poet's letters: "Were I transported to Italian plains, and lay by the side of the streamlet that murmured through an orange grove, I would think of thee, dear gutter of Stowey, and wish that I were poring on thee!" These are probably the most complimentary things anyone ever said about the humble gutter; and Lowes explains in a footnote that the Stowey gutter belies the modern connotations of its name. He substantiates this with Coleridge's own description: "Before our door a clear brook runs of very soft water. The runnel was as distinctive of the village as 'the four huge elms' which marked Alfoxden."

Modern English survival, though apparently in generic rather than specific use, is attested by an advertisement in the Shell Nature Series in the April 6, 1955 issue of *Punch*. A large water-color illustration shows numerous shore and marsh birds grouped in and around a narrow, shallow, fairly low-banked stream; and the accompanying text begins: "A tidal *gutter* on the east coast flats..."

An attempt to correlate the English homes of a number of the early settlers in Western Massachusetts with the appropriate information in the publications of the British Place Name Society proved interesting but fruitless. The volumes of their work thus far published – so exhaustive that even field names on larger estates are included – contain many references to brooks and streams, but none to gutters.

No attempt has been made to define the exact geographical limits of *gutter* in America. We do know that, like *swamp*, it became more common here than it ever was in England, and that it has been encountered by collectors of dialect and place names up and down the eastern seaboard. *Linguistic Atlas* workers in New England found only two informants using it, and then it was restricted to a specific place name context. In Charleston County, South Carolina, it is applied to a small stream in a salt marsh; Delaware knows it in a similar sense. My sole evidence for its occurrence anywhere west of the Alleghenies is the statement of an 80-year old

woman who told me that on her father's farm on part of the Cherokee strip in Kansas, there were two streams called gutters. The banks were high and worn and the streams had once been used as buffalo wallows. She presumes it was her father, a native of New England, who gave them the name *Gutter.* There is no conclusive evidence as yet for establishing the first use of the term in the United States, but a likely guess would be New England or Virginia around the middle of the seventeenth century. With only written evidence to rely on, we can only conjecture about its previous oral usage.

Earliest maps and land records demonstrate the use of *gutter* in the Connecticut Valley of Massachusetts; but the place names in which it occurs do not appear consistently. Certain distinctions and limitations of usage are evident: hill streams, even those which like a gutter, have steep sides and a relatively small flow of water in proportion to the size of the channel (also subject to seasonal variation), are usually called by other names. A similar topographic feature in many ways, but with higher sides and a larger valley of erosion, was customarily called a *dingle* – a term still commonly heard in the Valley, generically as well as in place names. The gutter is largely a lowland phenomenon. Perhaps because most of them were minor marsh streams, flowing through sparsely settled areas and having small topographic interest or economic significance, they were never a matter for much public concern. A few of them were, however, important enough to be named; usually descriptively, (*Running Gutter*, *Grassy Gutter*, *Dirty Gutter*, *Eight-Mile Gutter*), or for the owners or residents of the lands adjoining them (*Dorchester Gutter*, *Keep's Gutter*, *Sikes' Gutter*, *Terry's Gutter*). Let us examine the histories of some of these Connecticut Valley gutters in Massachusetts:

Eight Mile Gutter in the town of Wilbraham crosses the old Boston Post Road at a point which was a good eight miles east of the center of early Springfield. Around it are more of the common, utilitarian, workaday, landmark place names it represents: *Five-mile Pond*, *Nine-mile Pond*, and *Twelve-mile Brook.* This gutter is first mentioned in a land grant dated 1698: One of the pioneer Pynchons, who, with four companions, was making a rough survey of the area prior to "purchasing" it from the Indians, wrote: "We estimated the width of the pond there at about 60 rods and measured on West again to the rising near the *gutter* to a tree which made three miles." Charles Barrows, who studied Springfield place

names in the early years of this century, selected it as a typical gutter, and described it: "I followed the gutter to its source. The walk takes one through a swamp; above this under Stoney Hill is a pool which leads to a deer path; the valley opens into a space filled with black alder..."

The present name, *Eight Mile Gutter*, is first assigned to the stream in the official record of Pynchon's grant in the Registry of Deeds. The stream, or, more properly the channel, since it is now usually dry, is still known locally as *Eight Mile Gutter*, though intervening maps, including the United States Geological Survey topographic sheet for the area, show it with no name at all or designate it simply *stream* or *brook*. Edson's Historical Map of Wilbraham, compiled in 1917 and purporting to depict the history of the town since 1634, calls it Pole Bridge Brook and indicates a bridge of pine poles that once crossed it.

In 1795, the Great and General Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, which had already exerted considerable pressure on the citizenry to substitute civilized, genteel names for the barbarous and uncouth Indian designations, required all cities and towns in the Commonwealth to draw up and submit to it manuscript maps delineating their respective boundaries and noting salient topographical features. Springfield and its vicinity were accordingly surveyed by Israel Chapin, and the map was prepared by Luke and George Bliss. And on this map appears for the first time what may be the ugliest onomastic duckling of them all – *Dirty Gutter*. Though other small streams in the area, known earlier or later as *gutters* are called "small brook" or ignored completely, *Dirty Gutter* is clearly marked in the midst of what the Bliss brothers describe on the map as "pine barren interspersed with unimprovable swamp" – land which, incidentally, is now a densely settled section of Springfield. For at least the span of a generation, this gutter remained acceptable; it appears again on a small and wonderfully meticulous map drawn in 1827 by a prominent local author and divine, the Reverend William B. O. Peabody. Another call from the Great and General Court in 1830 demanded a new series of maps and surveys. The Springfield version is remarkably similar to the Bliss-Chapin map of 1785; in fact, one of the few differences is the omission of the name *Dirty Gutter*. Perhaps the slow process of euphemism had already begun: another stream called *Dorchester Gutter* in town records appears here as *Dorchester Brook*; and a

twentieth century copy of the Bliss-Chapin map, not altogether faithful to the original, has *Dirk's-* rather than *Dirty Gutter.*

Despite the doubly offensive potential of its name, *Dirty Gutter* did persist in local usage, attested by a deed dated March 23, 1846, conveying a small strip of land from Willial Orne to John and Charles Howard. The property description reads in part: "a tract of land lying in Springfield near Dirty Gutter." William Dwight, Justice of the Peace, signed his venerable names as witness, and the deed was recorded next day by Register William Rice, who may well have locked the name in his vault and never let it out – for this seems to have been the last public appearance of *Dirty Gutter* as a living name.

The only gutter shown on current editions of the United States Geological Survey topographic sheets for Hampden, Hampshire, and Franklin counties is *Running Gutter*, which rises in a marshy area in the town of Hatfield and eventually finds its way to the Mill River. It is certainly the longest and largest stream in the area to be designated as a *gutter*; it is also noteworthy that the USGS map offers the only evidence for the name – the same stream is called "brook one rod wide" on the state survey maps of 1753 and 1834. Later maps, done after the first edition of the USGS quadrangle in 1886 seem largely patterned after it, and follow the example in printing *Running Gutter.*

In the fall of 1754, Nathaniel Dwight completed a plan and survey of the Inward Commons of the town of Northampton, which, with "some alterations made by a committee" was finally published in April of 1757. It bears minute landmark notations – "spruce tree on ledge" and "stake and stones near path called Nehemiah's way"; and on a section of land thrust back by a crook in the Connecticut River, lying between "land sold to settle a former minister (Mr. Edwards)" and "sheep pasture of Timothy Dwight, esq.," is the mark of a stream flowing into the river. It bears the legend "pine bridge and gutter" and crosses a "path to boggy marsh and mountain" which later became the main road to Whately. This gutter, perhaps because of a flood or a change in its course occasioned by a shift in the soft soil through which it flowed, seems to have disappeared into limbo without ever having a proper name at all, because the Denison map, drawn 20 years later for the Great and General Court, merges it with the "brook from Baker's marsh," called Pine Brook on the 1831 map.

By way of an envoi, a brief look at the story of the gutter that started this inquiry: Jonathan Goldthwaite, an engraver by trade, made his home in Longmeadow during the first part of the nineteenth century. In 1831, he produced a map of the town, on which he designated as *Grass Gutter* the small stream, a little less than a mile long, that ran between Longmeadow Brook and the marsh along the road to East Longmeadow. Cartographically speaking, this was indeed a short-lived gutter, for after the Walling map of Hampden county in 1855, *Grass Gutter* or *Grassy Gutter* appears as a nameless squiggle of blue on maps and in county atlases; but we should remember that many of the latter contained considerable real estate promotion and were produced for the express purpose of attracting new residents. Then, too, these were Victorian times, when nice people made dainty references to limbs rather than legs, and proper ladies spoke never of a man's trousers, but of his unmentionables. Small wonder that Grassy Gutter lapsed into obscurity; the miracle is that the name it gave to the road beside it survived. Its very obscurity, off in low, sandy country overgrown with scrub oak and popple, was probably its salvation and the reason for its retention on the town books.

We have now seen that *gutter* has an eminently respectable history – it may even have come over on the Mayflower – and we are puzzled to realize that there are those among us who look upon it at best as a poor relation of a *dingle* and at worst as a freak to be summarily removed from official nomenclature. The current distaste for the word may go even beyond the connotations of guttersnipes and minds in the gutter; it may be rooted in that awful first syllable, for *gut* was once rather common as a place name element. *Gut Canso Meadow*, mentioned in early land grant records for the town of East Longmeadow, has long since passed from public domain. That name, incidentally, may well have come to Massachusetts by way of Nova Scotia, where even today residents of Cape Breton Island have been known to apologize to tourists attending their popular Gaelic *Mod* for the indelicacy of the name *Gut of Canso*, the strait that separates Cape Breton Island from the mainland. Perhaps they will yet change it. *Guts* are found as far away as Jamaica, B. W. I.; *Running Gut*, in the north of the island, is a small stream that runs from wet land to the sea, much like the gutters of coastal United States, and strengthens the possibility that the horrendous gutter may itself be a euphemism.

A few hardy gutters have survived the process of purification: *Rattlesnake Gutter* and a road named after it can be found in the town of Leverett in Franklin County, Massachusetts; and in the town of Chester, in Hampden County, *Stony Gutter Run* (an interesting example of place name pleonasm) flows out a brief existence in the Berkshire foothills. But the small streams of New England seem now, regardless of size, to be called *brooks*, almost to the exclusion of other possible terms. *Creek* has moved West; *branch* has gone South, and *rill* has found refuge in poetry; and so it is that *gutter* may one day have the distinction of being the only one of their number to be euphemized out of existence.

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Brand Names. – There is a theory that a linotype machine, if properly adjusted, could type automatically, among lines of nonsense, all lines ever written in literature, or science, or journalism. To be sure the press would have to run billions of years, and the possibility of printing everything that has been printed since Gutenberg invented the movable type will remain a theory. However, during the last few months we learned that a manufacturer of drugs has applied this principle in a limited way. To all manufacturers of drugs, cosmetics, spices, and the like the problem of finding brand names becomes more pressing every year. The *ANS*, although it counts among its members most of the serious onomatologists of the country, has been unable to render any help along this line. Now one of the best known manufacturers of chemical and pharmaceutical products, Charles Pfizer & Company, seems to have found a solution. After adjusting an IBM 702 machine to the requirements for acceptable brand names, the machine produced within two hours 42,000 names. Even if only five percent of these names can be used, the experiment will have fulfilled its purpose. Could we not make a similar experiment with potential place names? Many of us are tired of the monotonous way of applying existing names again and again.