Place-Names and Dialects in Massachusetts: Some Complementary Patterns

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IN THE FIRST CENTURY OF MASSACHUSETTS HISTORY, early settlers regarded its territory as a vast domain requiring days to cross; as Perry Miller notes, towns to the west like Northampton were "indeed remote, as far from Boston as Kansas City today."[1] In that first spaciousness settlers from different counties in England formed communities either along the Connecticut River, where Northampton and Springfield are, or in the lowlands bordering on Massachusetts Bay. Although they all spoke English, and, for the most part, had the same faith, they were far enough apart to develop somewhat different habits of speech and different practices in naming places. In the 300 years of Massachusetts history, these different linguistic habits and practices resulted in the development of three subdialects and in patterns of place-names that complement each other. The *Linguistic Atlas of New England,* under the direction of Hans Kurath and his associates, contains the full account of these subdialects and the isoglosses which define them,[2] and makes it now possible to trace the history of place-names for localities in the three areas, to describe the generic features and use of Indian names particular to each area, and to witness, finally, the way in which the growth in population and the shrinking of space filled the entire state with generics of all kinds.

Map I outlines the three subdialect areas whose major isoglosses converge in central Massachusetts somewhat east of the Connecticut River. These subdialects are defined by

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[1] *The New England Mind: from Colony to Province* (Boston, 1952), p. 226. The following sources were consulted for names of places in Massachusetts, their history and location: John Hayward, *A Gazetteer of Massachusetts* (Boston, 1847); *Historical Data Relating to Counties, Cities and Towns in Massachusetts,* prepared by Kevin H. White (Boston, 1966); *Massachusetts Localities,* compiled by the Massachusetts Geodetic Survey (Boston, 1960); Samuel A. Mitchell, *County and Township Map of the States of Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island* (Philadelphia, 1874); Elias Nason, *A Gazetteer of the State of Massachusetts,* 1st ed. (Boston, 1874); *idem.,* revised by George J. Varney (Boston, 1890); Jeremiah Spofford, *A Historical and Statistical Gazetteer of Massachusetts,* 2nd ed. (Haverhill, 1860); *United States Geographic Survey, Topographic Maps of Massachusetts,* prepared by the United States Department of Interior Geological Survey, current to 1969; *The Origin of Massachusetts Place Names,* compiled by the Writers' Project of the Works Project Administration (New York, 1941), and O. W. Walker, *Atlas of Massachusetts* (Boston, 1916).

[2] Providence, 1939–1943.

several lexical and phonological features.[3] The Southwestern New England subdialect is separated from the other subdialects by three principal alternate expressions: the name for a vehicle used to drag field stones is *stoneboat* in the West, and *stone drag* in the East; *belly gut* in the West means "to face down on a sled," and the expression in the East is *belly bump*; the name for a sycamore tree in Western Massachusetts is *button ball*, and the East has *button wood*. Phonologically, Western Massachusetts retains the postvocalic /r/; Eastern Massachusetts does not. Western Massachusetts has the low central /ɑ/ in words like *car*, *garden*, and *father*; in Eastern Massachusetts the vowel is a somewhat more fronted /a/. In unstressed syllables, words like *towel* and *funnel* are pronounced with the high central allophone of /I/ in Eastern Massachusetts, with schwa in Western Massachusetts.

The difference between the two subdialects in Eastern Massachusetts depends on a few lexical items: the word for "pancake" in Essex and Middlesex Counties is *fritter*; farther south one finds *griddle cake*. Other regionalisms distinguishing the Northeastern and Southeastern subdialects include in the North *teaming* for "hauling" and *carting* in the South; *mud worm* in the North is a variant of *angle worm*; and in the North, also, *orts* for "garbage" is a variant of *swill*.

These examples indicate the scope of the limited differences among the subdialects. The isoglosses dividing Eastern from Western Massachusetts are surely more important than those that separate the Southeastern and Northeastern subdialects. The lexical items that characterize the subdialects are representative of the common speech in New England, the expressions used by "an intelligent and active middle class."[4] Together these three subdialects form part of the major Northern dialect which includes within it all of New England; their differences and similarities are rooted in the early settlement history of Colonial America, the period extending from the arrival of the Pilgrims in 1620 to the Revolution. Within that same period, the early plantations, villages, and towns in Massachusetts were laid out and named. Some of the prominent settlements near Boston in the seventeenth century were Cambridge, Dedham, and Roxbury; farther north there were Salem and Newbury; and Springfield in Western Massachusetts is mentioned as early as 1641. The people of these towns, together with those in Plymouth and Duxbury in the Old Bay Colony near Cape Cod, contributed to the formation of the three subdialects and also had some influence on the choice of names for newer localities in the Commonwealth. Yet the influence on naming that is the central concern of this study was not entirely a conscious one. No doubt, many early names for localities in New England were chosen in honor of a prominent person or in remembrance of a town or village in England. But despite the deliberateness of these choices, the patterns of generics found in place-names from region to region correspond quite well in distribution with the subdialect variants already described. It would seem

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[3] Hans Kurath, *A Word Geography of the Eastern United States* (Ann Arbor, 1949), pp. 17–24; figures 9, 11. Hans Kurath and Raven I. McDavid, Jr., *The Pronunciation of English in the Atlantic States* (Ann Arbor, 1961), maps 2, 32, 46, 148.

[4] Kurath, *A Word Geography*, p. 5.

that at the same time settlers chose a name for a new locality, they had an impulse to make that name adhere in form to others in the same region. Whether or not the early settlers knew the meaning of generics like *-bury*, *-ham*, and *-chester* is less important than the fact that the new names they chose had the same generics.

In Eastern Massachusetts, as the triangles on Map I indicate, there were 15 towns in the Southeastern dialect region with the generic *-ham* and three more in the Northeastern area; in the West there were five. Two of the five were New Framingham and New Hingham, borrowings from Southeastern names. These names were changed during the 1760's to Lanesborough and Chesterfield, leaving three towns in the West with the generic *-ham*. During the same decade there is evidence to show that *-ham* enjoyed some popularity in Eastern Massachusetts. In 1765, the town of Stoughton in Norfolk County was divided, and the new town was at first called Stoughtonham. In 1762, the town of Oakham in Worcester County was named, possibly for the abundant oak woods in the town, possibly for the town of Oakhampton in Devonshire, England.[5]

An even more striking example of sectional preference for a generic in place-names is the occurrence of *-field* in Western Massachusetts. There we find that 19 localities adopted names with *-field* as the generic compared with eight in the East. Add to this fact that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there were half as many communities in the West as in the East, and the productiveness of the generic *-field* is immediately apparent. Moreover, the settlers did not merely name localities in the West after those in England (Springfield may have been one; Ashfield another), but they used *-field* together with words of location like "west" and "middle" and with animal names as in Deerfield. So popular was *-field* that it competed with *-ton* and *-town* as generics to be combined with surnames. In the eighteenth century, towns not only had names like Belchertown and Cummington, but also Partridgefield (now Peru) after Oliver Partridge and Murrayfield (now Chester) after William Murray, Lord Mansfield.

Finally, in the northeast corner of the state, Essex County has three towns which very early adopted names showing the generic *-bury*: Newbury, Amesbury and Salisbury. Farther west in Middlesex County, Tewksbury became a town in the early eighteenth century and ten years later a settlement was first established at Roxbury, Canada (now Warwick), a territory granted to descendents of 39 soldiers from Brookline and Roxbury who in 1690 had fought against the French in Canada.[6] The incidence of *-bury* in this rather narrow stretch of land in northern Massachusetts is insufficient to establish it as distinctively characteristic for the subdialect. More important, however, is that *-bury* is a generic found almost entirely in the East. The one example in the West is Shutesbury, located near the isogloss running north and south. The generic *-bury* is also interesting because of its apparent relationship to settlement history; the farther west one goes, especially along the northern tier of the state, the later is the date for locality-names that include *-bury*: Newbury 1635; Tewksbury 1734; Roxbury, Canada 1744; and Shutesbury 1761.

Table I summarizes the other more frequent generics that were used to name localities during the first 180 years of Massachusetts history. The figures designate the number of times each generic was used to name

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[5] In the early history of Massachusetts, the boundaries of the Commonwealth included parts of Maine. Although these settlements, bordering on the ocean, are not included in this study, it is worthwhile noting that several had the generic *-ham*: Windham, Bowdoinham, Topsham, Gorham.

[6] *Nason*, 1890, p. 663.

MAP I

EARLY GENERICS
● -FIELD
▲ -HAM
■ -BURY
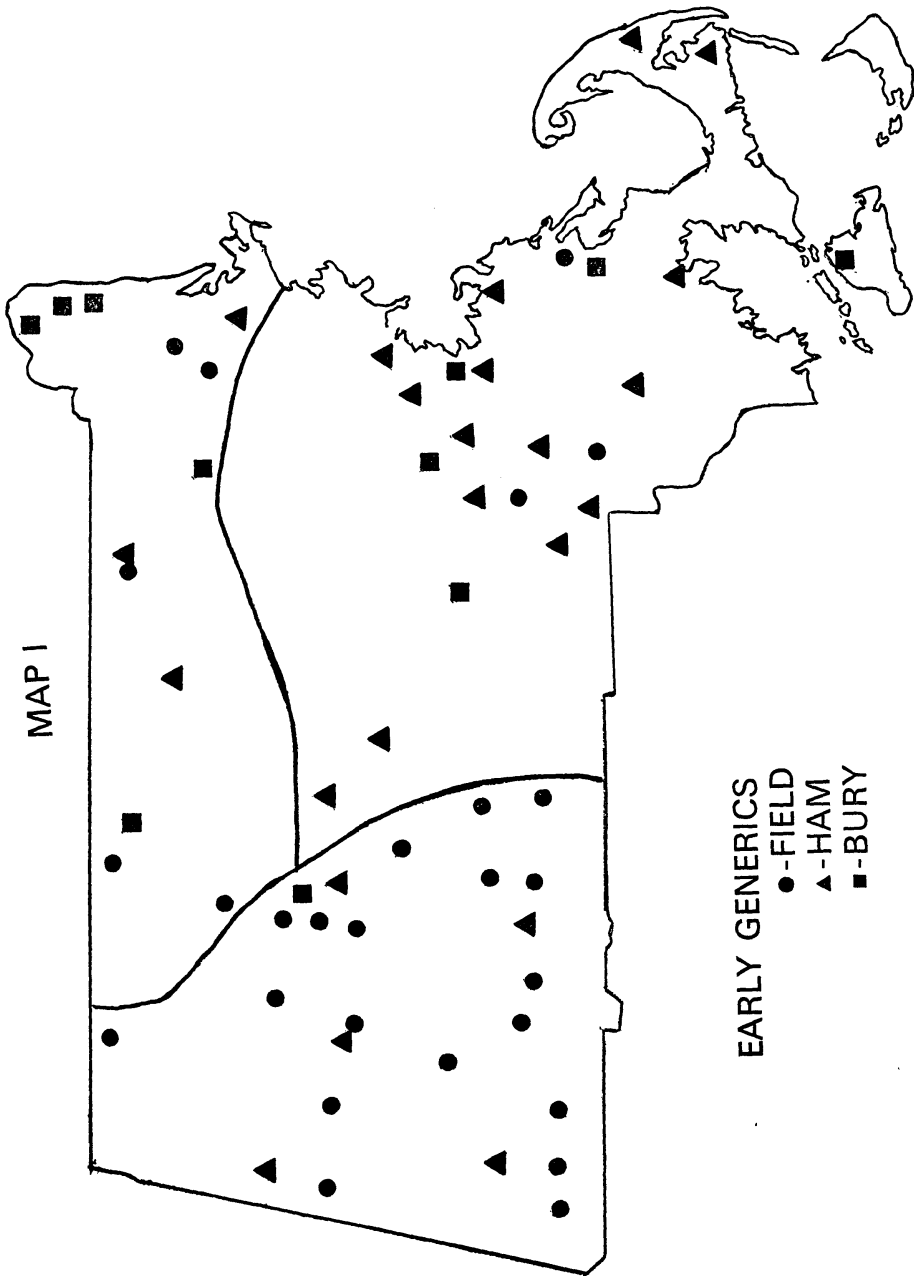
a place, implying nothing about the permanence of the name itself. Names like Hack's Grant or Middletown on Martha's Vineyard were short-lived; within a generation Swampfield gave way to what is now Sunderland. The generics *-boro*, *-bridge*, and *-chester* are most prevalent in the East; *-grant*, a generic used to name localities before they were established as towns, occurs primarily in the West. Other generics like *-mont* and *-mouth* are also distributed significantly – because of Massachusetts topography – from the ocean and lowlands in the East to the Berkshires and the Taconic range on the border of New York.

TABLE I

Incidence of Generics in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*

	Area I	Area II	Area III
boro (borough)	8	—	2
bridge	4	—	1
burg	2	—	2
bury	5	5	1
c(h)ester (caster)	5	3	1
den (don)	3	1	1
field(s)	3	5	19
ford	4	4	3
grant	—	1	8
ham(e)	15	3	5
land(s)	3	—	3
ley (ly)	2	3	4
mo(u)nt (mt.)	1	—	3
mouth	5	—	—
parish	2	—	2
ton.	26	6	9
town	6	—	4
wick	2	1	2

* Generics which occurred more than three times are listed.
Area I   = Southeastern Massachusetts subdialect
Area II   = Northeastern Massachusetts subdialect
Area III = Southwestern New England subdialect

The second major stock of names available to settlers in the colonial period was, of course, Indian names. Again and again, one finds entries like these in the *Records of Massachusetts General Court* or in the *Plymouth Colonial Records:* "...the township ... at Wannamoisett and places adjacent, shall hensforth be called and knowne by the name of Swansy."[7] As Map II indicates, Indian names for localities were noted down all over the state. The triangles indicate Indian names recorded and used in the seventeenth century; the circles indicate Indian names recorded and used in the eighteenth century. Notice that in Western Massachusetts

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[7] *Plymouth Colonial Records,* vol. IV, p. 175.

MAP II

EARLY INDIAN NAMES – LOCALITIES

▲ SEVENTEENTH CENTURY
● EIGHTEENTH CENTURY
■ ADOPTED AND RETAINED
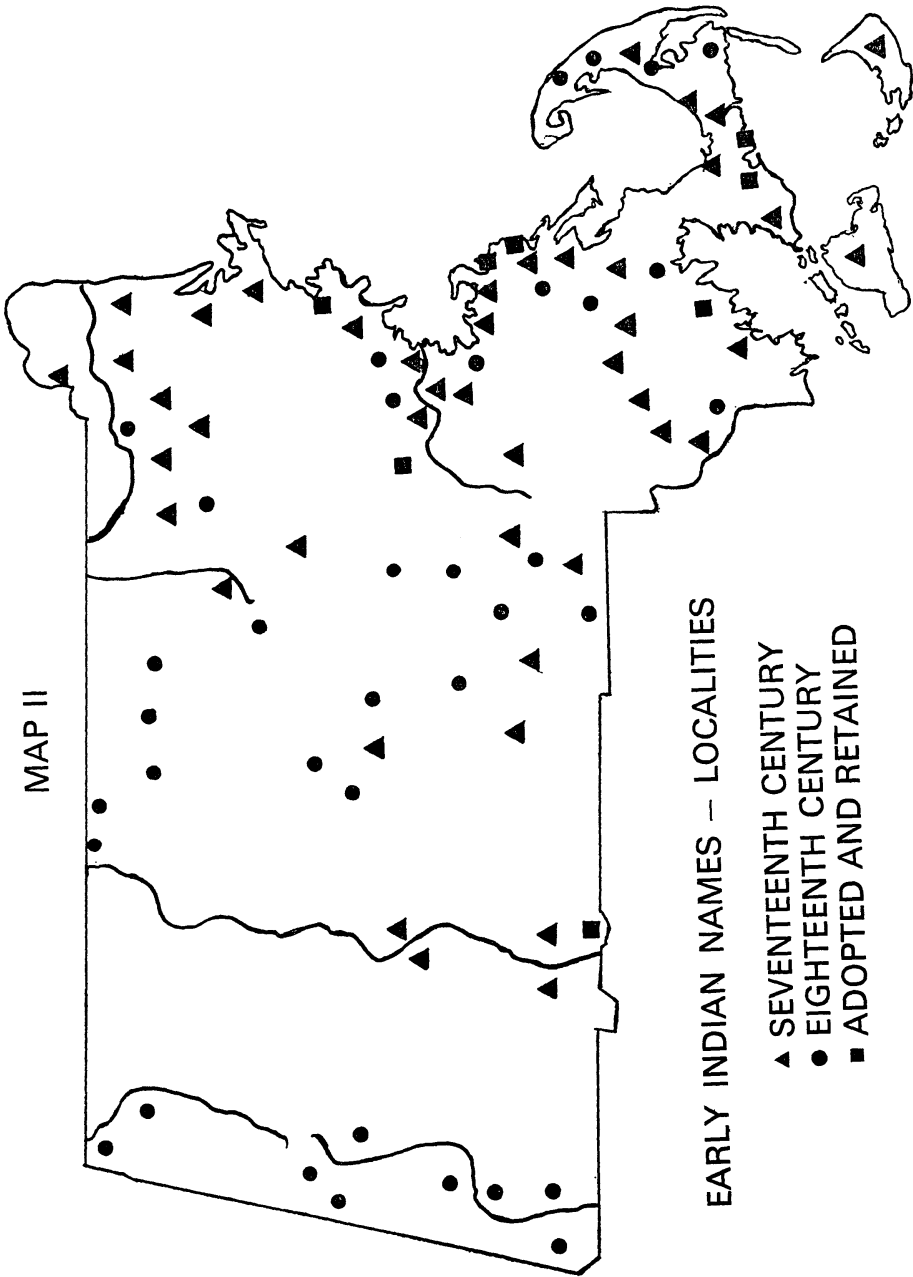
triangles appear near the Connecticut River, circles near the Housatonic and Hoosac; just as the generic *-bury* suggests the progress of settlement, so the Indian names also signify the gradual development of white communities. In Eastern Massachusetts, the river systems of the Charles, the Merrimac, and the Nashua did not have a similar influence. The few squares on the map indicate the Indian names that were used in very early times and that were also permanently retained. Their infrequency is an indication of the response to Indian culture by white settlers. As far as the names of localities were concerned, the more quickly 40 or 50 families gathered together in a settlement and thus became eligible to form a town, the more quickly the Indian name was displaced. To cite one example, the Massachusetts General Court promised the inhabitants of Quobauge that they could change the name of their settlement to Brookfield as soon as 50 families had settled in the town.[8]

Two of the towns that have continued the same Indian names since the early era are Natick and Mashpee, both of them Christianizing communities whose aim was to convert Algonquians under the evangelical guidance of John Eliot and Richard Bourne.[9] Hyannis, after an Indian chief, was a small village in the eighteenth century, at the head of a large inlet on Cape Cod, and Cohasset and Scituate, located next to each other along the coast, were, until the mid-nineteenth century, the only towns with Indian names whose population from the beginning was predominantly white. Nantucket barely fits the category of a name in continuous use since the early period. The first settlement was called Nantucket; in 1687 it became a town and was renamed Sherburn; but in 1795, just before the later time limit of this map, the residents restored its original name.

The experience of Nantucket is a paradigm for the suppression and reemergence of Indian names for localities. Map III depicts the heavy appropriation of Indian names to designate towns and villages, especially in Southeastern Massachusetts, during the nineteenth century and to a lesser degree in the twentieth century. As the population of Massachusetts quintupled from the beginning to the end of the nineteenth century, Indian names, which had been hitherto largely restricted to natural features, became a valuable source for designating new centers of population. Moreover, they had a euphonious, primitivistic appeal for Americans who were beginning to witness the effects of industry and urban crowding on the traditional patterns of life. Indian names for localities were probably adopted in large number in remembrance of a natural landscape and a communal form of society that were slowly disappearing. We can readily see the strength of this feeling in an editorial from *The Providence Journal.*[10] Referring to a law passed by the newly created State of Michigan governing the policy of naming localities, the editorial says,

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[8] *Massachusetts Bay Records,* vol. V, Part 2, p. 568.

[9] *Nason,* 1890, s.vv. Natick and Mashpee.

[10] Quoted in *Hayward,* 1847, s.vv. North Bridgewater.

MAP III

CURRENT INDIAN NAMES

▲ AFTER 1890
● 1800–1890
■ BEFORE 1800
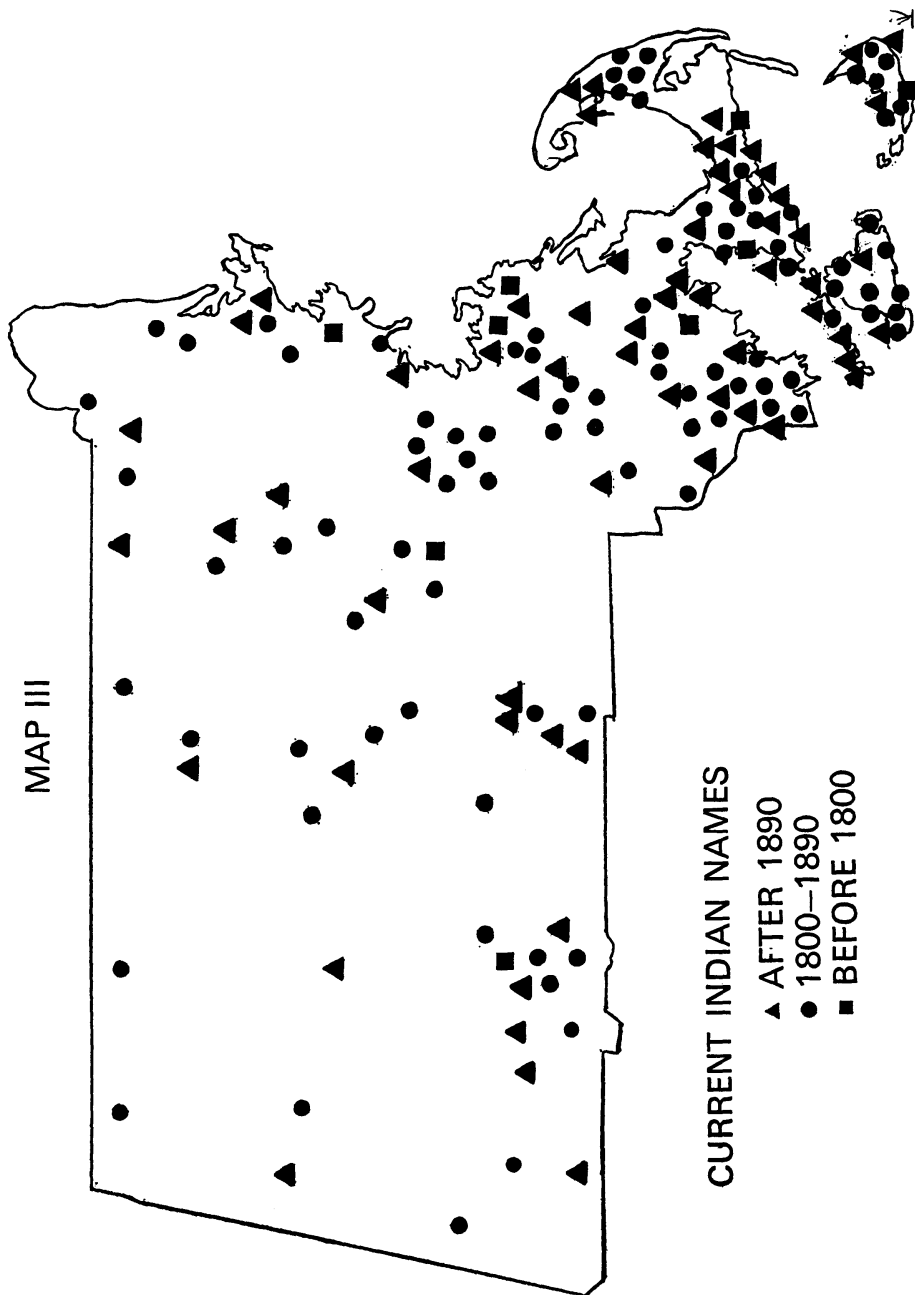
> Michigan's rivers and lakes still retain the full, rich and swelling names which were bestowed upon them by the red men of the forest; and her towns bear the names of the sturdy chiefs who once battled or hunted in their streets. Strange, when we have such a noble nomenclature as the Indians have left us, that we should copy from worn out names of ancient cities, and which awake no feelings but ridicule, by the contrast between the old and the new. Mohawk, Seneca, Massasoit, Ontario, Erie, how infinitely superior to Paris, London, Fishville, Buttertown, Bungtown, etc. . . . It seems that not content with driving the Indians from the soil, we are anxious to obliterate every trace of their existence . . . .

The sentiment expressed by this editorial motivated, if not extensive renaming of localities as with Nantucket, at least the restoration of Indian names to serve as designations for new towns and villages. North Village in Newton, the place where John Eliot in the seventeenth century had first gathered his Indian followers together before they departed for Natick, was renamed Nonantum; farther south, one comes upon names like Acushnet, Mattapoisett, Titicut, and Seekonk, names all known in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and restored to use in the nineteenth. Subsequently, this feeling for another people and a passing era of American life either diminished or turned to other causes; in the twentieth century, as the triangles indicate, fewer localities assumed Indian names. This feeling, as an aspect of nineteenth century Massachusetts culture, was largely restricted to Southeastern Massachusetts and pockets elsewhere in the state, especially near Springfield. Indian names concentrated heavily in the Cape Cod area thus contribute to the features which help to define the Southeastern Massachusetts subdialect.

In contrast to the sense of the past that contributed to the renewal of Indian names, there was also a strong sense of progress, of opportunities for political development and economic expansion. Table II indicates how social, political, and economic change contributed to place-name practices in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It points to the effects that a burgeoning people, crowded in space, had on a small state. For example, the generic *-hill* became a popular designation for post offices, villages, and developments. A closer look at the history of population centers like Oak Hill, Powder Hill, Round Hill, and Corey Hill indicates that developers, having earlier laid down streets, houses, and factories in the lowlands, began to clear off rising pieces of ground and to give to the new localities names once designating forested areas. Other generic terms for natural features also indicate the internal spread of population. In the nineteenth century, generics such as *-wood(s)*, *river*, *brook*, and *springs*, were popular; in the twentieth century, settlements near ponds, shores, in hollows and valleys, on necks and highlands were established.

Moreover, though we have seen the revived interest in Indian names, we should also recognize the state-wide commitment to new industry. In every part of Massachusetts *-mill(s)* became a popular generic, even in Southeastern Massachusetts, where there are Westport Mills, Paper Mill Village in Plymouth, and City Mills in Norfolk. Curiously enough, many of these localities subsequently changed their names or became ghost villages as New England industries moved South to Virginia and North Carolina to take advantage of cheap labor. Finally, the generic *-mill(s)* was combined with other generics to form the names of towns created in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; for example, Millbury in 1813, Millis in 1885, and Millville in 1916.

Three other generics that manifest close relationships with each other are *-ton*, *-ville*, and *corners*. In early Massachusetts history, *-ton*, as Table I indicates, was pressed into frequent service: not only in names adapted from England, such as Boston, Plympton, and Groton, but also in new creations, in Newton, Weston, and Hubbardston. The nineteenth century saw the rapid rise of *-ville* as a generic, applied frequently especially in the period between 1848 and 1890, yet in the current century it has diminished considerably. Granville in Western Massachusetts, for John Carteret, Earl of Granville, is the only town that has been named directly for someone; otherwise, *-ville* has been combined with common and proper nouns almost without limit and sometimes in alternation with "village" as in Pondville in 1890 but Pond Village now, or, on the other hand, Chase Village in 1890 but Chaseville now. The generic to which *-ville* has given way is *-corner(s)*; instances of it are recorded as early as 1847 in *Hayward's Gazeteer*: Four Corners in the town of Cheshire in Western Massachusetts and Angier's Corner in Newton — but the overwhelming number of villages bearing names with the generic *corner* appears in the twentieth century.

Table II thus provides a reading of changes in the nature of communities, in the use of the land. It contains generics such as *-dale* and *-park*, no doubt employed to make localities appear attractive and prestigious. Furthermore, the Table is restricted to generics occurring ten times in the Southeastern subdialect region — the largest and most heavily populated — and five times elsewhere. The total number of generics that have been used in the twentieth century is quite large.

TABLE II

Incidence of Generics after 1800*

	more frequent between 1800–1890	more frequent after 1891
Area I (Southeastern dialect)	bridge	
	brook	
	center	beach
		city
	crossing	corner(s)
	dale	district
	harbor	height(s)
	land(s)	highlands
	ley(ly)	hill(s)
	mill(s)	island
	mo(u)nt (mt.)	junction
	plain(s)	landing

	more frequent between 1800–1890	more frequent after 1891
	station	neck
	ton	park
	town	point
	view	pond
	village	s ('s)
	ville	shores
		side
		square
		street
Area II (Northeastern dialect)	center	corner(s)
	dale	hill(s)
	depot	park
	farms	point
	island	
	land(s)	
	mill(s)	
	parish	
	town	
	village	
	ville	
	wood(s)	
Area III (Southwestern dialect)	center	corner(s)
	city	dale
	fall(s)	height(s)
	farm(s)	hill(s)
	land(s)	hollow
	mill(s)	park
	parish	side
	plain(s)	valley
	river(s)	
	spring(s)	
	station	
	village	
	ville	
	wood(s)	

* Listed are generics which occurred more than ten times in Area I and more than five times in Areas II and III after 1800. The generics *city* in Area I and *town* and *wood(s)* in Area II occur with no change in frequency in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The history of Massachusetts place-names thus provides an index of a changing society. The state was communal in the first two centuries of settlement, its people joined together by common traditions and a common faith, a people that Perry Miller describes as a "folk rather than an aggregation of disparate individuals."[11] The subdialects characterized by the *New England Dialect Atlas* depend on regional words and pronunci-

[11] Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*, (Boston, 1939), p. 416.

ations that are common to a people with traditional mores; the distribution of early generics like *-field*, *-bury*, and *-ham* support that characterization. Surprisingly, however, regionalisms like *common* and *green* to designate a center of a town or village appear infrequently in names of localities; the only examples were an Upper Green and a Lower Green in Newburyport in 1874.[12] In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the pattern of life in Massachusetts, again as the new names for places signify, was modified and disrupted through the growth of population, the shrinking of space, and the development of industry. The many examples of Indian names for localities in the Southeastern part of the state from the nineteenth century on comprise the one modern feature that is related to the subdialect distinctions. Thus from the perspective of the last half of the twentieth century, names for localities, if ordered by time and place, offer patterns symbolic of the settlement, consolidation, and later complexities of Massachusetts history.

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[12] The regionalism *intervale* meaning "bottom land" may perhaps be the source for the village Intervale in the town of Athol.

NOTICE

The South Central Names Institute, sponsored jointly by the East Texas State University and the American Name Society, will hold its third annual meeting at East Texas State University on June 22 and 23, 1972. A deadline of April 1, 1972 has been set for the submission of papers in the various areas of onomastics. Papers from the 1970 meetings have just been published under the title, *Of Edsels and Marauders*, edd. Fred Tarpley and Ann Kerns Moseley, and are available for $ 1.50 per copy. Address all communication concerning the above to Professor Fred Tarpley, Department of English, ETSU, Commerce, Texas 75428.