

DAVID FLEMING

The Lost Meadows of Northampton

WHEN I MOVED to Massachusetts in August 2006, I was forty-five years old, divorced, and the father of two girls, aged eighteen and eleven. Neither girl moved here with me. For eight years, we had lived together in Madison, Wisconsin, where I taught at the University of Wisconsin and rented an apartment in university housing. The girls shuttled back and forth between that apartment and one across the street, which belonged to their mother. When she finished her Ph.D. in 2004 and accepted a job in Vermont, we decided that the girls would stay with me for two more years—until the older one graduated from high school and the younger one finished elementary school. Then, I would try to find work in the Northeast, bringing us all close together again. When that time arrived, and I was offered a job at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, our older daughter decided to move to Vermont to attend college; the younger one, it was decided, would also move to Vermont. The turn of events was clearly bittersweet for me.

Still, I accepted the UMass position in the winter of 2006 and began making plans to move out here in July or August. By spring of that year, however, I still had not found a place to live. I kept thinking I would fly out and look in person, but the cost was prohibitive; and, besides, I knew I'd be living here on my own, so there was less pressure to find the perfect house in the perfect school district. I just needed to live somewhere close to work with a spare bedroom for my daughters.

Now, in the Midwest, cities and towns are spread further apart than they are in New England. When you look for housing near the University of Wisconsin, it's a good bet you'll find it in Madison, which covers many square miles and a wide variety of neighborhoods. Occasionally, people who want a bigger yard will end up in a suburb like Sun Prairie or Verona; but most people settle in Madison. So I was surprised when I started looking online for housing near the University of Massachusetts: there were literally *dozens* of villages, towns, and cities to choose from. Most I'd never heard of, all were within a short distance of one another,

and each, it seemed, had its own history, topography, even personality. In addition to Amherst, there was Hadley, Sunderland, Leverett, Hatfield, Northampton, Shutesbury, Belchertown, Easthampton, Granby, South Hadley, North Amherst, Deerfield, South Amherst, Palmer, Turners Falls, Montague . . . the list went on and on. It was a little overwhelming, this profusion of places.

But with an atlas nearby, I began to get a lay of the land. The key topographical feature in the area, I learned, was the Connecticut River, which flows south from New Hampshire and Vermont, forming much of their mutual border, then cuts through Massachusetts and Connecticut before emptying into Long Island Sound. From a distance, the river looks like it follows a fairly straight path; but it actually twists and turns a good bit—and nowhere more so than between Hatfield and Easthampton in Massachusetts. There, the river veers sharply west, then back east, then flows south past the “Oxbow,” a dramatic U-shaped bend that was cut off from the main channel of the river during the floods of 1840. A sculpture on a railroad bridge in Northampton depicts the winding path of the Connecticut River in this area.

The river is accompanied during its Massachusetts journey by an interstate highway, I-91, which travels beside it and once, in Springfield, even crosses it. Bisecting both river and highway, about midway down



Water Music by David Teeple. Northampton, Massachusetts.



View south from the Coolidge Bridge, Route 9, down the Connecticut River and toward the Holyoke Range.

the state, is Massachusetts Route 9, a key artery connecting Northampton, on the west side of the river, with Hadley and Amherst, on the east. Route 9, which crosses the river on the Calvin Coolidge Bridge in Northampton, is used heavily by buses of the Pioneer Valley Transit Authority, free for students, faculty, and staff of the area's "Five Colleges."

Casting a shadow on Route 9 from the south is the Holyoke Range, a ten-mile-long line of traprock peaks that is one of the few mountain systems in North America oriented along an east–west axis. Only one thousand feet tall at its highest, the range is really just a string of hills; but it is a prominent feature of the local landscape.

Imagine, then, a map of Massachusetts with a cross located about one-third of the way from the state's western edge. The vertical axis is two parallel lines, representing the Connecticut River and I-91. Bisecting that axis is another pair of lines, both horizontal, representing Route 9 and the Holyoke Range. For many people here, this grid of river, highway, route, and range is the landscape of their daily lives.

I WANTED TO LIVE SOMEWHERE on the x-axis. Amherst, of course, was the logical first choice. After all, it would be near my office. In Madison, I biked every day to campus, a beautiful, bracing ride along the shores of Lake Mendota. But as I looked for rental units online, it became clear that

Amherst didn't have a lot of suitable options for me. There were plenty of student apartments, as well as rental houses in suburban-style neighborhoods. But neither option seemed like a good choice for a middle-aged professor living alone. Still, I kept looking and even came close to signing a rental agreement on a small house in a neighborhood near the town center.

But as documents were being faxed to me in Wisconsin, I began to have doubts. With nearly 38,000 inhabitants, Amherst may be the most populous town in the area, but that's mostly because of the students. Without them, it's really just a *village*: an attractive but small downtown with the requisite churches, restaurants, and bookstores, surrounded by pleasant residential neighborhoods. There's the Emily Dickinson Homestead and Amherst College—both lovely. And the schools are said to be excellent. But I would be living apart from my children for the first time since they were born. I was afraid the place would only exacerbate my solitude.

So I started looking at other options. Moving west on Route 9 toward the river, the next town is Hadley. Much smaller than Amherst in population, it's made up almost entirely of detached single-family dwellings in predominantly rural and suburban settings. There are few rentals of any kind. For someone not raised here, Hadley is an odd place. It combines one of the best-preserved agricultural landscapes in New England with some of the ugliest twentieth-century roadside desecrations in the area. The seventeenth-century town common—the longest in New England—is practically unspoiled, surrounded by farmland laid out almost exactly as it was 350 years ago. But the rest of the town is organized around a long, congested, commercial strip, with an ugly, 1970s-era shopping mall next to a newer but equally ugly shopping center, several stand-alone big box stores, and assorted muffler shops. There are things to admire in Hadley—the old cemetery off West Street, the bend of the Connecticut River on the town's border with Northampton, the bike path that cuts through on an old bed of the Boston and Maine Railroad. But it didn't seem a very appealing home for me.

That left Northampton. One of my new colleagues had taken me through the town on the last day of my interview trip—and I liked it. It's not a particularly big place: with only 30,000 inhabitants, it's smaller, officially, than Amherst and not even among the twenty most populous cities in Massachusetts. But it's remarkably dense for a town its size. When you're in the middle of Northampton—at, say, the intersection of Main and Pleasant Streets—you feel like you're in a much larger city. The sidewalks are lively; the restaurants and bars are thriving; there are no vacant



Main Street, Northampton, looking southeast.

storefronts. It's also architecturally striking: perfectly proportioned, old brick buildings—most of them three to four stories high, each distinct from the others yet handsomely joined—line both sides of Main Street for nearly a mile. In fact, the four to five blocks of Main Street from Strong Avenue to State Street is said to be one of the best-preserved nineteenth-century urban landscapes in the country.

Northampton would require a longer commute; but the bustle of downtown would compensate, I thought, for the inconvenience of the bus ride to campus. And, in fact, the more I learned about the place, the more I liked it. I had grown up in a quiet southern suburb and attended a quiet southern college. In my young adulthood, not surprisingly, I developed an intense love of cities. I spent years in Washington, DC, and Pittsburgh, living in dynamic urban neighborhoods, walking everywhere, and coming to love the street life: the convenience of having everything I needed close by, the sense of belonging to a vibrant, bounded, human place. I wanted something like that again, and Northampton seemed the closest thing to it. Plus, there was easy access to the interstate highway, which would connect me to my children in Vermont.

So I rented half a duplex near the Bridge Street cemetery and quickly fell in love with the place. I took the bus to work every morning, walking the few blocks to the stop on Bridge Street. Back in Northampton

by late afternoon, I spent the rest of the day exploring my new home. I walked downtown every day, often once before supper and once after. The weather was beautiful half the year and miserable the other half; but I went out no matter what. And I found the town inexhaustibly interesting.

Now, I've always been an enthusiastic walker, though it was only as an adult that I discovered the pleasures of urban walking. As I grew older, I found that walking helped me think through my problems: with work, writing, kids. But in Northampton, my propensity for walking became nearly obsessive. Perhaps the problems had become more complex and the walking more therapeutic. Perhaps I was escaping the solitude of my new house. Perhaps I just needed the exercise. Regardless, when I moved here in 2006, my life became unusually peripatetic. And Northampton turned out to be a good setting for such a life, presenting a lively, varied, intimate scene to observe on foot.

My most common walk is to the post office on Bridge Street—to catch the bus for Amherst or to mail bills or just to get some fresh air. To get there, I walk down Parsons Street, passing Linden, Walnut, Cherry, and Union Streets on the way. At the intersection of Parsons and Union, I cross over the schoolyard and then turn right on Bridge Street, passing the line of well-preserved eighteenth- and nineteenth-century houses on



Plate 4 of the *Atlas of the City of Northampton, Massachusetts*, D. L. Miller & Co., 1895. Pine Street is now Parsons Street. *Courtesy of Historic Northampton, Northampton, Massachusetts.*



The Dickinson Block on lower Main Street, Northampton, looking south.

the north side. The post office, on the south side, is a warehouse compared to its predecessor on Pleasant Street, but it's at least convenient. From there, I usually turn up Market Street, where there's now a coffee shop on the corner, followed by several antiques stores and used-book shops. Up a little further, on the east side, is Joe's Pizza, where people line up outside in the evenings. Heading back home, I cross the same streets I passed earlier, but now in reverse order: Union, Cherry, Walnut, Linden. At Walnut, Market becomes North, which curves east to intersect with Parsons, enclosing my neighborhood in a residential triangle.

My favorite walk, though, is downtown. For that, I head west from my house, then south on Market to Bridge Street, where I turn right, walking under the railroad bridge. Once you cross the parking lot by Fitzwilly's, Bridge Street becomes Main, and you're in downtown proper. Although, for many people here, the heart of downtown is upper Main—from, say, Center to Masonic—I like lower Main, before it climbs what used to be called Meeting House Hill.

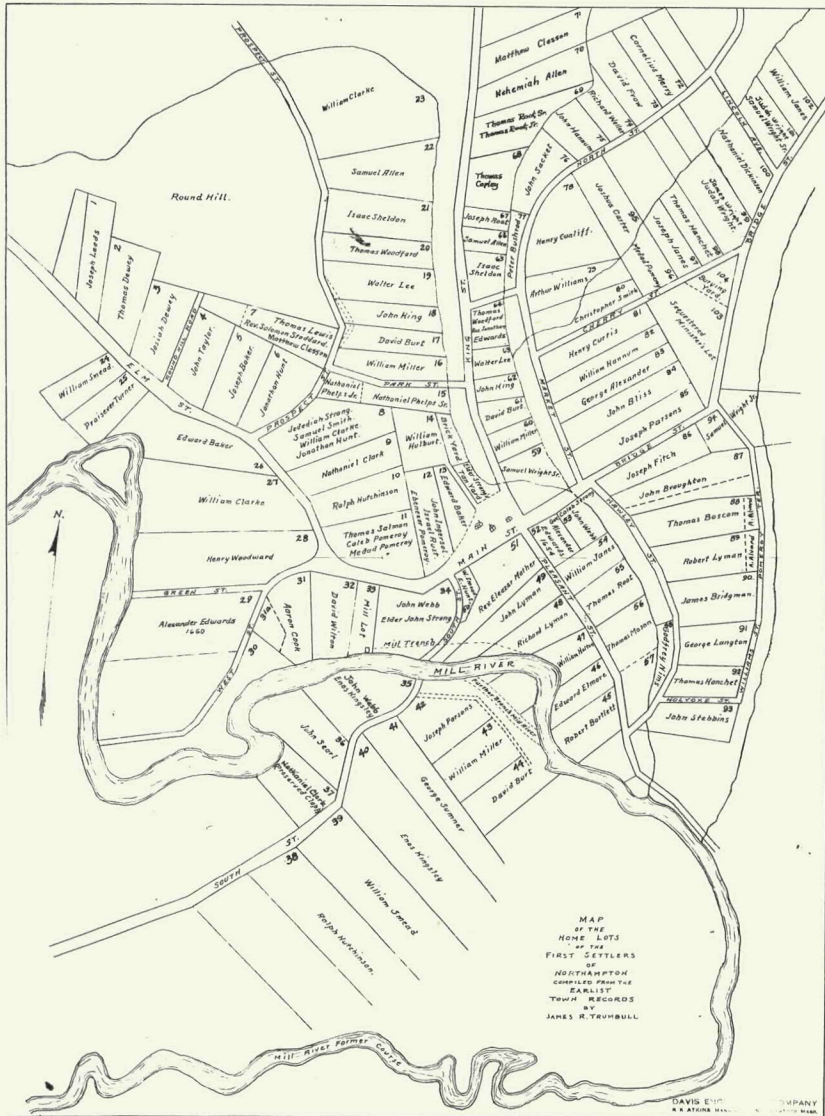
The main intersection in town is where Main crosses Pleasant, an interchange famously friendly to pedestrians. At regular intervals, all traffic stops, and the intersection is given over entirely to walkers, including those traveling diagonally across it. I usually cross on the south side, from

the bank to the candy shop, and then head west up Main, sometimes stopping at the drugstore to read magazines. The sidewalk here is wide, and there are almost always musicians out, as well as petitioners of various kinds. Across Main are imposing nineteenth-century structures: the county courthouse, the old Northampton Savings building (now Urban Outfitters), the First Churches. The sidewalk on that side of the street, from Gothic to Masonic, is a hangout for loiterers of all kinds.

Back on the south side of Main, past the camera store on the corner, with Herrell's Ice Cream down the hill to the left, I cross, first, Old South Street, then Crafts Avenue, also a steep decline to my left; Main Street now turns north towards Smith College and higher precincts. At City Hall, I cross Main and, on the other side, turn left, passing more shops and restaurants. Then, at Masonic, I turn right, walking past Packard's Bar, the old button factory, and Woodstar Café, with the Christian Science meeting house on my right (where I sometimes read the daily Bible verse in the window). At the intersection of Masonic and Center, I either turn left toward State Street or right toward the police station, where I can cut through to Gothic. Either way, I arrive soon at Trumbull Road (formerly Park) and then King Street, which I cross, heading left to Edwards Square. This is a shortcut to North Street, which I then follow home.

On Monday and Wednesday evenings, I sometimes walk to Forbes Library to grade papers or read. For that trip, I head down King Street, turn right up Trumbull, then left down State Street and, after a couple of blocks, go right up steep Bedford Terrace to Elm, where I turn left, walking past College Hall and down the little steps onto West Street. I come back the same way, often stopping at State Street Fruit for wine, Serio's for the butcher, or the Hungry Ghost for fresh bread. On weekends, I sometimes go to Smith College to study, later walking home through downtown.

Northampton is big enough that I feel anonymous when making these rounds (though I once heard a twenty-something on her porch say to a friend, with some irritation, "That's the second time he's passed by today"), but small enough that I feel like it's *my* town, that I know its shortcuts, its tallest trees and loveliest porches. The town's varied population adds to its seeming inexhaustibility: on Main Street in the spring and fall, one sees a wild assortment of people: teenagers, senior citizens, homeless men and women, shopkeepers, protestors, college students. The town is also varied topographically, built as it was on a series of hills interspersed with plateaus and waterways. The streets follow the contours of these peaks and valleys,



Map of Original 17th Century Home Lots, compiled from town records by James Russell Trumbull and published in his *History of Northampton Massachusetts from its Settlement in 1654, Volume 1*, 1898. Courtesy of Historic Northampton, Northampton, Massachusetts.

so there are few right angles. In fact, you can walk in Northampton for dozens of blocks and end up where you started, never once having taken a ninety-degree turn. In this, my experience of the town is not unlike that of Solomon Stoddard, who lived on Prospect Street in the seventeenth century, or his grandson, Jonathan Edwards, who lived on King Street in the eighteenth, or *his* grandson Timothy Dwight, who lived further up King and once wrote of the town's streets that they proceeded from the center like "the claws of a crab."

Walking Northampton so doggedly these past few years, I like to think I have come to know it as a citizen would. I have certainly been a devoted scholar of it: after walking, I often find myself poring over maps, browsing the Internet, reading obscure books in the town library. I take my children and visitors on long walks and point out little-known landmarks. I know I'm not a native, an important distinction in a place like this, with its long history and many temporary residents. But I pay my taxes, answer jury summons, follow city council meetings on TV, read the *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, support local stores. And I walk; I am always walking.

LOOKING BACK to my first few years here, I must have known there was farmland down by the river. I had often looked southeast across Bridge Street toward the fairgrounds and the little airport; I knew the land sloped downhill in that direction and that the river was somewhere off in the distance. And I occasionally walked down Pomeroy Terrace, where behind the Victorian houses on the east side of the street you could see a decline towards cornfields—though what usually drew my gaze in that direction was the Holyoke Range. In fact, I had always assumed that Bridge Street and Pomeroy Terrace marked the eastern edge of Northampton—that everything beyond, like the fairgrounds, the airport, the cornfields, was a kind of urban wasteland, not really part of my vibrant city with its hip coffee shops and bustling art galleries.

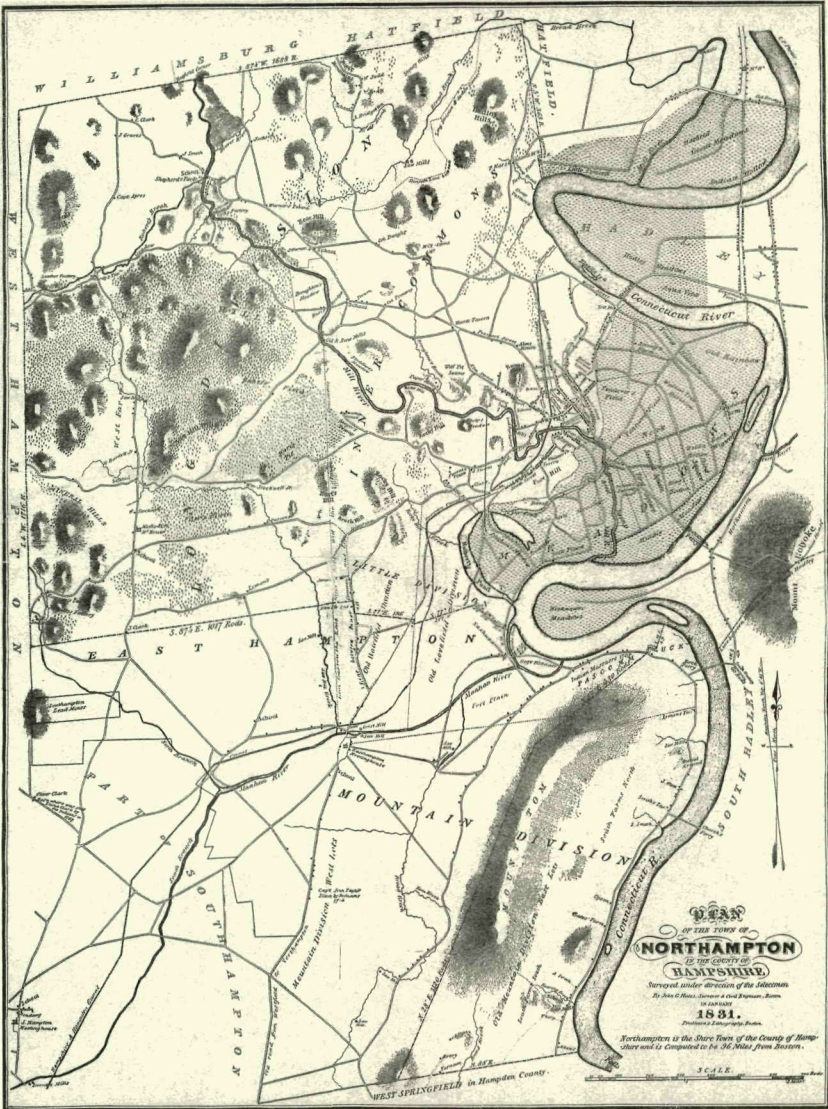
I knew that my neighbors Dean and Sara sometimes went running down by the fairgrounds, though I never accompanied them and wondered vaguely whether there weren't better places to go. One night they took me down past Pomeroy and Williams to see an immense swarm of fireflies in an empty field; but I never went further than that, certainly never as far as the interstate highway, which seemed to me an inviolable barrier in that direction. On the levee behind Williams Street, where I sometimes walked in nice weather, you could see and hear the traffic of

I-91 — unpleasant visually and aurally and a sign, in my mind, that I had reached the limits of my town. Even when I was actually on I-91, driving south toward Springfield, and making that long graceful curve past the Oxbow and through the gap between Mounts Holyoke and Tom, I assumed that Northampton was all to my right and that the farmland I saw to my left was something else — Hadley perhaps? or a sparsely-populated rural tract under the Holyoke Range? or an empty right-of-way such as one finds along interstate highways nearly everywhere?

Then, one day, at Forbes Library, I was flipping through a book commemorating Northampton's 350th anniversary, when I came across an essay by Patricia Wright titled "On the Ground: The Origins of Northampton's Peculiar Plan." In the essay, Wright recounts the story of the European settlement of Northampton; as she does so, she refers several times to the "great meadow" on the west bank of the Connecticut River. In fact, according to Wright, the men who "planted" Northampton in the mid-seventeenth century were attracted to the region mainly because of the floodplain along the river: "well over 2,000 acres in extent, an abundance of rich, open land unsurpassed anywhere in New England" (4).¹ If the place had at first appealed to Europeans as a trading post, chronicler Samuel Maverick wrote in 1660, "the gallant land about it hath invited men to make it a Towne" (quoted in Wright 4).

"Gallant land"? "2,000 acres in extent"? What were Maverick and Wright talking about? My Northampton was a compact, hilly town, with rivers and creeks, depressions and inclines. It was also intensely *developed*, with a busy commercial district centered on old Meeting House Hill and dense residential neighborhoods fanning out in every direction, replete with curving streets and houses dating back centuries. There were no meadows here, certainly nothing two thousand acres in extent! And yet, according to Wright, it was the floodplain by the Connecticut River that was the original attraction of the area. In May 1653, she writes, twenty-four settlers from Connecticut petitioned the Massachusetts General Court "to plant possess and Inhabit" the place they called "Nonotuck." When the Court asked them to divide the land into two plantations, the petitioners "appointed the bounds" of only one of them, later called Northampton, which included "the great Meddowe on the west side of the Connecticut River." (The other territory would eventually be organized as Hatfield.) Years later, one of the commissioners who helped divide "Nonotuck" in 1653 affirmed that "the great meadow in Northampton . . . was the chief land aimed at" (quoted in Wright 4).

What made the “great meadow” so attractive to the town’s settlers, says Wright, was not just its fertility, caused by the flooding of the Connecticut River. There were also bluffs along the meadow’s edge, “providing a village site above the floodplain but with immediate access to it.” In other words, here was both open, fertile land for agriculture and hills



Plan of the Town of Northampton by John G. Hales, Boston, 1831. Courtesy of Historic Northampton, Northampton, Massachusetts.

nearby where the settlers could reside without worry of flooding.²

All this became vividly clear when I saw the old map on page 5 of Wright's essay: it was John G. Hales's 1831 "Plan of the Town of Northampton." That map was a revelation to me. From it, I began to realize my great mistake about Northampton: my identification of the town with its urban core, an identification that ignored the extensive, fertile farmland located to the south and east, farmland that, in fact, made the town possible, that was the "chief thing aimed at" by its original European settlers. I had been focused since I got here on the center of Northampton—those dozen or so streets radiating out from the old common like "the claws of a crab"—but, historically, the key geographical feature of the area was the rich, open farmland that lay between downtown and the river. The "great Meddowe" was as much a part of Northampton, historically speaking, as Meeting House Hill—the two were, in fact, inseparable.

As Hales's 1831 map clearly shows, two hundred years after the town's founding, the meadows of Northampton were still a prominent feature of the local landscape. Visitors from the south, in fact, could not enter Northampton without passing through them; and all who did so commented on their extent and beauty. In an 1821 book, Jonathan Edwards's grandson Timothy Dwight, traveling to Northampton from New Haven (where he was president of Yale), described the ride from Springfield this way:

About four miles above South Hadley, the Connecticut passes through the two large mountains, Tom and Holyoke, having apparently made here, in ancient times, a breach in this range and forced its passage. By old people in Northampton I was informed, many years since, of an Indian tradition that the great valley north of these mountains was once a lake. The story is certainly not improbable . . . [T]he general geography of the country, and the particular appearance of the scenery near the river, are favorable of this opinion.

Approaching Northampton at sunset, Dwight writes of the "delightful prospect of the country before us" (*Travels*, 1821, Vol. I, Letter XXXII).

In the next chapter, Dwight says of the city's first planters that they were "allured by the size, beauty, and fertility of the fine intervals [i.e., low-lying lands] in this region." He continues: "The surface of this town-ship is eminently pleasant. The soil of the town plot is excellent and being universally meadow under the highest cultivation, and everywhere interspersed with orchards, makes a most cheerful appearance. There are no more productive grounds in New England" (Letter XXXIII).³



Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow*, 1836. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, 1908.

In 1836, Thomas Cole painted his famous view of the Connecticut River Oxbow from the summit of Mt. Holyoke, a painting that now hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In the painting, to the right of the Oxbow, you can clearly see the meadows of Northampton—soon so famous that the town would be known as “Meadow City.”

Visitors to Mt. Holyoke today are greeted with a scene not unlike the one Cole painted (though the photograph to the right is an autumn shot and more northerly in direction).

The meadows of Northampton! For days after reading Wright’s essay, I couldn’t get them out of my mind. But when I searched online for “great meadow,” Northampton didn’t come up. It was as if the “rich, open land” by the Connecticut River never existed. In fact, the only relevant book I could find with “great meadow” in the title referred not to Northampton but to Concord, Massachusetts. That book, Brian Donahue’s *The Great Meadow: Farmers and the Land in Colonial Concord*, turned out, however, to be a crucial step in my education. It was unlike any book I’d ever read—a history not of towns and people, churches and government, but of soil and farms, manure and cider. I’d been to Concord; I knew about the eighteenth-century battle and the nineteenth-century literary renaissance. But other than Walden Pond, I didn’t know anything about the

land beneath it or the relationship its settlers had to that land.

According to Donahue, the story of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century agriculture in New England towns like Concord was not, as many historians have suggested, a story of resource exploitation and depletion. The farming practices of the first settlers and their descendants, up to the early nineteenth century, were, in fact, ecologically sustainable, resting upon “the careful balance and integration of diverse elements across a varied and difficult landscape” (xv). There was plowland for corn, rye, beans, and other food crops; orchards for apples and cider; pastures for grazing cattle and oxen; woodlands for fuel; and meadowland for hay. For nearly two hundred years, argues Donahue, the people of Concord husbanded these resources carefully. Most families, in fact, owned multiple parcels of land in multiple parts of town, each parcel used for different purposes. Some land, because of its soil, topography, or location, was better for tilling, some for pasturage, some for fruit trees. But the whole system, argues Donahue, centered on the flood-prone meadows by the Concord River, low-lying land that was mowed for hay, which was then carted to the family barn and fed to the cattle during the long New England winters. The manure that those cattle produced was then used as fertilizer to maintain the productivity of the arable fields. “The native hay meadows lay at the heart of the system,” writes Donahue, “and were in many ways its most stable, intensively managed component” (xv).



The view northwest from Mt. Holyoke, October 2006, with the meadows of Northampton across the river and the town beyond them.

A similarly comprehensive study of the “great meadow” by the Connecticut River has not been written. But what Donahue’s book about Concord added to my understanding of Northampton was a more telling image of what its settlers saw in the floodplain 350 years ago and how that land figured in the life of their town up to the early twentieth century. Now, it’s clear from the immense size of the Northampton meadows—far larger than anything at Concord—that these fields were not just for growing hay. Although the area sits in the hundred-year floodplain of the Connecticut River, it long supported food and cash crops, even if it was too low-lying for residential, commercial, or industrial development. But even with that difference, Northampton resembled Donahue’s Concord in at least one key aspect: unlike in later U.S. farming communities, the planters of Northampton settled close together, each family possessing a houseplot in town, where it built barns and stables as well as a house. In the nearby uplands, the family had rights to pasturage and wood. And nearly all families had one or more parcels of land in the “great meadow” by the Connecticut River: most likely for tillage, perhaps for pasturage and orchard, certainly for hay.⁴ The meadows were thus both a private and a public resource. As Trumbull reveals, the floodplain as a whole was fenced by the town to keep out livestock; but individual lots in it were not enclosed, neighbors often working together on adjoining parcels.⁵

In other words, if the village of Northampton, with its meetinghouse and town common, its streets radiating out like “the claws of a crab,” grew and prospered after 1654, developing a seemingly autonomous life of congregations and newspapers, politics and commerce, its outlying fields, forests, and orchards remained a crucial scene of residents’ daily life. They moved about the whole place—not as I do, walking only from one side of the village to the center and back again, but also traveling between the town’s core and its peripheral precincts, including the huge meadows by the Connecticut River.⁶

I was beginning to realize that those meadows were not just the first thing visitors saw when they came north through the gap between Mt. Tom and Mt. Holyoke. The great expanse of rich open land by the Connecticut River supplied Northampton (humans and livestock alike) with much of its basic sustenance for at least two and a half centuries. Managing that resource required regular communication between city and countryside. People may have resided in town, but they regularly traveled to and worked in the meadows much of the year; and, in winter months, meadow hay filled the barns and fed livestock throughout town.

I was beginning to realize something else. The meadows of Northampton were still here! They had not been developed or paved over or lost to a change in the river's course. They hadn't been turned into a warehouse district or open-pit mine. They were intact, almost exactly as they had been since the town's earliest days. In fact, soon after reading Wright and Donahue, I discovered the Massachusetts Historical Commission's 1982 "reconnaissance report" on Northampton, which opens with this *modern* description of the town:

Northampton is situated within one of the broadest expanses of the Connecticut River Valley. The easternmost portion of town consists of a fertile river floodplain considered to be some of the most productive cropland in New England. Stretching west of the floodplain is a complex of moderate to rugged uplands. (1)

"Fertile river floodplain," "complex of . . . uplands"—this twentieth-century description matches exactly that given by Wright for the seventeenth. I knew one feature well: the "uplands" where my town was located. It now dawned on me that the other feature—the floodplain—was the huge expanse of fields that I saw to my left as I traveled south on I-91. Those fields were not some exurban wasteland or remote district of Hadley. They were the Northampton meadows, and they had survived into the twenty-first century!

Despite the near silence about them on the Internet, in local tourist information, in town signage, the great meadows of Northampton had been right under my nose the whole time, practically hidden from me, though they are in many ways the most impressive and enduring feature of the local landscape.

U.S. Geological Survey map of Northampton and vicinity (1964, photo-revised, 1979), compiled from the Easthampton and Mt. Holyoke quadrangles, 7.5 minute series (topographic). The low-lying lands are in white; the line curving down the map is I-91.





November 2009: I walk the levee behind Williams Street and approach I-91.

So, one day in November 2009, I walked down Pomeroy Terrace and slipped through the arbor archway at the end of the street. I then followed the levee until it met the interstate highway and curved sharply to parallel it—I had done this before. But now, where the levee crossed Hockanum Street, I did something I had never done, which I didn't know I could or would ever want to do. I turned left, walked down the other side of the levee, ignoring a rather forbidding "No Trespassing" sign, and walked under the highway—as if through a hidden gate into a secret garden.

I was suddenly standing in a huge field, just a few minutes from downtown, and yet in a whole other world, one that during years of rather intense pedestrian exploration I never knew existed. I was in the great meadow of Northampton.

The fields were brown, and there was an audible hum from the highway behind and above me; but in front, stretching for what seemed like miles in every direction, were cornfields—and in the far distance a line of trees that marked the Connecticut River. Beyond all that lay the gray mass of the Holyoke Range; and, further above, the sky opened, light blue on this Saturday morning, stretching as far as the eye could see. I felt like I was in Kansas or Nebraska, on a vast tract of farmland, with hills in the distance and a blue sky above and all around me.



November 2009: the Northampton meadows.

I walked toward the river. What was most noticeable about the landscape, at least compared to my life just a mile or so behind, was the quiet. At one point a pickup truck drove by; later, I saw a man walking his dog. But otherwise it was deserted. I realized for the first time that my dense little city, with its crowded shops and noisy bars, had a fully intact, centuries-old agricultural district, stretching for thousands and thousands of acres, all just beyond the edge of downtown.

I followed dusty Hockanum Street all the way to the river—to what I later surmised was the old ferry landing for the trip up Mt. Holyoke. There, I sat by the water, cold and menacing under the blue November sky. I was completely alone, and the quiet was almost discomfiting. I later got up and walked east through the dry cornfields. I thought about going all the way to the fairgrounds and then coming up to Bridge Street near the Coolidge Bridge before heading back home. But, to be honest, the landscape was almost too vast, the “No Trespassing” sign lingered ominously in my mind, the place more and more deserted as the afternoon wore on. So, I doubled back toward Hockanum Street and arrived again at the underpass where I’d started.

I was struck by how unspoiled the landscape was. Clearly, the reason for the meadows’ fertility—regular flooding by the Connecticut

River—was the reason why, nearly 400 years after impressing the first English settlers, they remain virtually unchanged: still largely uninhabited, still almost exclusively agricultural, still a vast expanse of flat open land in one of the most intensely settled parts of North America. Few things in Northampton are *just* as they were 350 years ago; but the meadows have been constant. And yet, though I had lived barely a mile away for more than three years and had explored the town extensively during that time, I had been almost completely unaware of their existence. I had come to Northampton looking for vibrant city life, and I was now realizing that dense, lively, urban spaces like Northampton are, in a way, constituted by their very opposite—that hidden from the view of city-dwellers like me is the farmland that makes city life possible. And the unique, the astounding, thing about Northampton is that the two worlds, city and country, are so close to each other. Here there is no intermediate zone, no suburbia, deceiving its residents into thinking that they can have both an urban and a rural life without ever actually having either.

AND YET, despite this remarkable proximity of town and country, at some point in its recent history, Northampton turned its back on the floodplain by the river. A prominent part of daily life here for centuries, the meadows were, in the last fifty years or so, literally cut off from the city. They are now a kind of ghetto district, known and experienced by only a few, segregated from the rest of the town by those with the power to do so. It is as if “Meadow City” had renounced its agricultural past, unsure how to think or what to do anymore with the vast, open “interval” in its midst.

Today, in fact, you cannot get to the Northampton meadows without doing something that feels vaguely illicit—namely, walking or driving past a “No Trespassing” sign. On the whole east side of town, there are only two ways into the meadows, both of them narrow roads that pass under an interstate highway, neither well marked. Meanwhile, although the city has erected half a dozen detailed historical markers in the last few years, there is no accessible historical information about the meadows anywhere. Even at Wikipedia, the article on Northampton never once mentions them.

In fact, the meadows have been practically criminalized over the last half century in ways that are antithetical to their history as an integral part of the town. The few news articles about the Northampton meadows on the Internet or in the archives of the *Daily Hampshire Gazette* are all about misbehavior occurring there and the efforts of landowners to

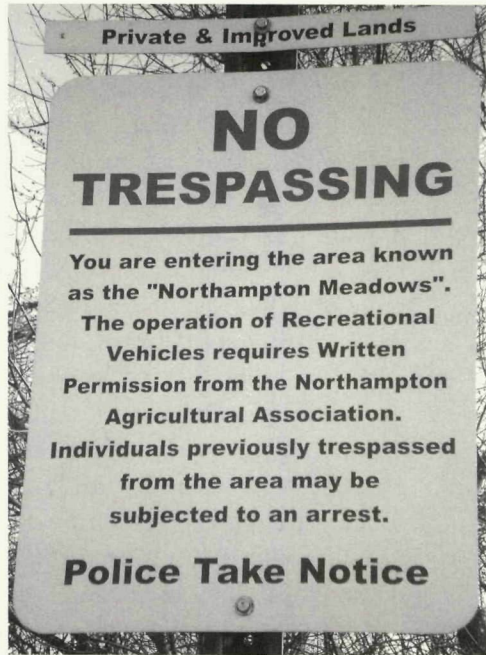
prevent or prosecute that misbehavior. There are stories about teenagers off-roading pickup trucks, damaging the low-lying fields; there are accounts of illegal dumping and vandalism; and there are darker stories, involving bodies found in the meadows' marshes and ponds. In Tracy Kidder's book about Northampton, *Hometown*, the police find a man masturbating in the meadows; another is interrupted at night, walking to the river, apparently to commit suicide. After a while, reading these accounts, you begin to sympathize with local farmers and landowners, who have been intent on "protecting" the area by denying access to

it. It's unclear to me, though, whether the meadows' enforced isolation from the rest of town is cause or effect of the misbehavior taking place there. I wonder, in other words, is the disconnection from downtown a result of misuse or an invitation to it?

As for me, I remain convinced that I have the right to walk in the meadows, but I admit that every time I've been there, even in the middle of the day, I've felt uneasy, as if, at any moment, an irate landowner is going to ask me to leave—or worse.

How did the meadows become so estranged from the rest of the city? How were they so bluntly cut off from downtown, shunted to the side, excluded from public use, even removed as a topic of conversation: un-discussed, unmentioned, unmarked? How, in less than a hundred years, did the phrase "Meadow City" lose all meaning?

The answer, I believe, comes in three parts. First, over the course of the last century and a half, we all lost touch with the farmland that sustains us. All of us have ancestral dirt under our fingernails, but the vast majority of us cleaned it off so long ago that we can't even remember what it feels like. Fewer than 2 percent of Americans now farm for a living, a historic shift that affects us all in myriad, profound ways. Now, I'm sure there are people in Northampton who would be surprised to learn that I was so

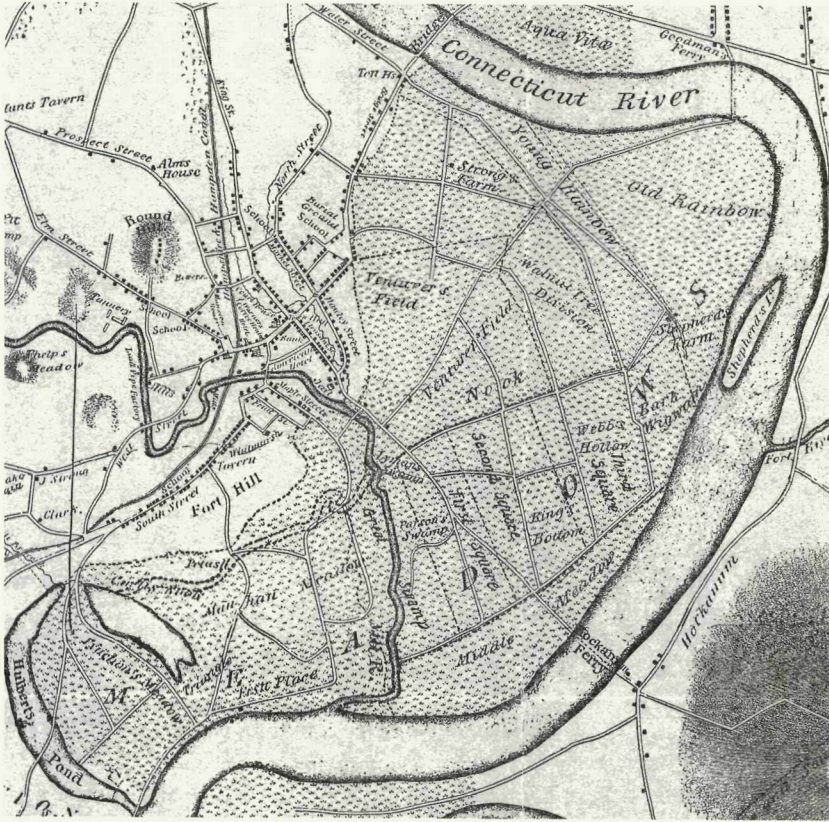


ignorant of the meadows. Maybe this essay just shows how disconnected I have become from agriculture. But I think my story is a common one. Over the last century and a half, farming in this country underwent intense industrialization, consolidation, corporatization, and globalization. It has been technologized and marginalized, shunted off to the background so that most of us never think about it. We consume agricultural products (animal- and plant-based) in ways that obscure and hide their origins from us. A similar thing has happened geographically; more and more of us live in cities and suburbs: artificial places, paved over, used for highly restricted residential, commercial, and industrial purposes. We see no fields, no livestock, no harvesting of grain or meat. Our experience of the rural, meanwhile, consists mostly of driving through or by it.

Second, rural land in this country has, over the last century, been privatized and enclosed—i.e., made publicly inaccessible. I'm not talking about private ownership of land; much of downtown Northampton is privately owned—the shops, the restaurants, the galleries. But streets and sidewalks provide easy public access to those places, and those streets and sidewalks are a protected commons in our midst. In the countryside, by contrast, reasonable public access to private property is routinely denied; even roads can feel off-limits. In the case of Northampton's meadows, this denial of public access took place surprisingly recently.

For the native inhabitants of the area, prior to European contact, the meadows were an important communal resource: for farming, fishing, hunting—and the occasional camping that facilitated those activities. The fields didn't belong to any particular persons; they were managed for collective use—and for the past and future as much as for the present.⁷ Even the first English settlers of Northampton had a more collectivist ethic regarding the meadows than we do. We saw above how the original planters were all ceded land there, often in small, dispersed parcels; and we speculated about how each family balanced that resource along with their other holdings in the settlement. Further, we saw how the town as a whole managed the fields, even when they were divided into "private" parcels. And we saw how, later, when more and more residents led lives unconnected to agriculture, the meadows were still an integral part of Northampton.

Like the town, the meadows were long organized into districts, which residents up to the early twentieth century would have treated almost like neighborhoods. In Hales's map from 1831, you can make out most of the twelve divisions that Trumbull lists: Old Rainbow, Young Rainbow, Walnut Trees, Venturer's Field, Last Division, Bark Wigwam, Middle Meadow, First



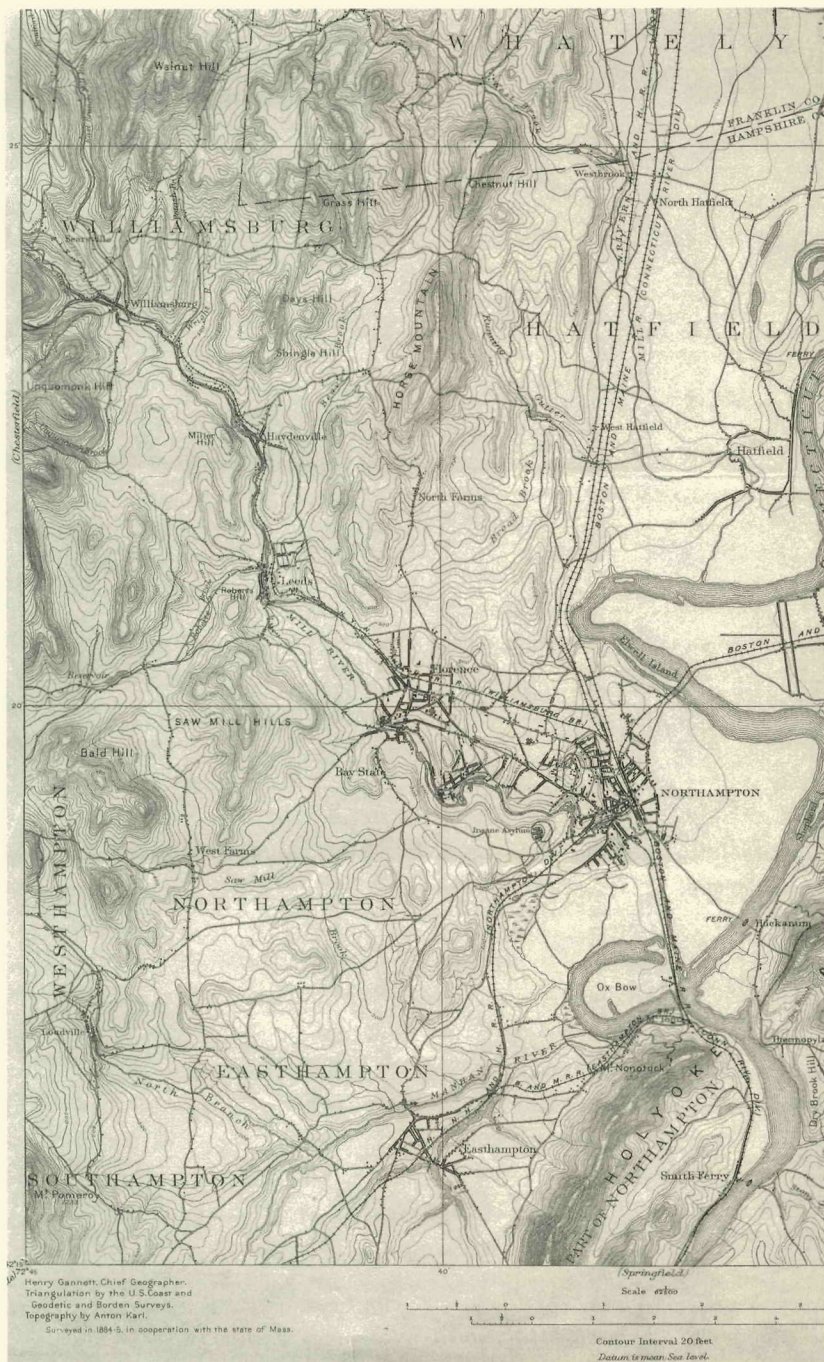
Hales's 1831 map of Northampton (*detail*), showing the internal division of, and roads within, the meadows. *Courtesy of Historic Northampton, Northampton, Massachusetts.*

Square, Second Square, Third Square, Manhan Meadow, Hog's Bladder. The names were apparently as familiar in 1898 as they were 250 years before.

Hales's map also shows an intricate interlacement of roads and paths in the meadows—some no doubt pre-Columbian in origin. In other words, there were not just “neighborhoods” here; there were roads connecting those neighborhoods with one another and with downtown. Those roads were clearly seen by all as public. Take this account, published in the *New York Times* in 1865 by a person (“C. H. L.”) reminiscing about Northampton in the 1820s and '30s:

Then, to 'do Mount Holyoke,' was to walk or ride as one felt inclined, through those lovely Northampton meadows, mosaiced by the varied crops imbedded therein by the thrifty farmer—maize, potatoes, the tall broomcorn and waving grain. Tobacco, mind you, was then eschewed,

THE MASSACHUSETTS REVIEW





and all other deleterious weeds. Arrived at the river, the calm blue Connecticut, Charon was summoned from the opposite shore by the blowing of a horn, arousing the echo nymphs, who repeated the strain again and again, even mocking the shouts of the merry party. What a pleasant sail was that across the river, and how beautiful the windings of that lovely stream, and how clear and distinct opened the “Ox Bow” to our delighted vision, and Old Mount Tom frowning darkly down!

Then, as now, agricultural land needs to be respected. There is no right to trample someone’s crops or damage their property, whether that property is urban, suburban, or rural. But just because an ancient public road or pathway cuts through land now privately owned doesn’t mean the public loses all rights to the byway. In her history of walking, Rebecca Solnit shows how “ramblers” in England have won the right to use ancient byways, footpaths, and roads in rural parts of the country, *even when those routes are now on private land*. There’s no question that the misuse of the Northampton meadows by some visitors warrants preventive and even punitive measures. But it doesn’t warrant denying all access to this long-cherished communal resource.

LEFT: U.S. Geological Survey map of Northampton and vicinity (1895) (*detail*), showing Hockanum Road (the way to the ferry landing).

ABOVE: Frederick N. Kneeland in the Northampton meadows, c. 1890s.

Courtesy of Historic Northampton, Northampton, Massachusetts.

There's a third reason Northampton lost its meadows: the interstate highway. It's easy to forget how young the interstate highway system is and how dramatically it has changed our landscape and our lives during the last half century. The interstates are a marvel—I can cruise down I-91, get on I-90, and be in Boston in an hour and a half, from clear on the other side of the state. I can get up to northern Vermont to see my children for lunch and be back home in time for dinner. And the highways are, in their way, lovely. You can see in maps how gracefully I-91 curves through the Northampton meadows. There are no traffic lights, no sharp turns, no stop signs. You enjoy two lanes in both directions with wide shoulders, an expansive, verdant median, and an average speed of over 65 mph.

Of course to build such high-speed arteries, you need a lot of land. And to make sure there are no interruptions, it all needs to be self-contained: no Main Streets, no little roads to contend with, a separate world all about movement, distance, and speed, carved out of, and indifferent to, the local environment.

All of this has benefitted us immensely. And yet the interstates have also done enormous damage. They facilitated suburban sprawl. They divided cities and exacerbated racial and class differences. They killed small towns that found themselves suddenly off the beaten track. Here in western Massachusetts, I-91, completed in the late 1960s, divided Springfield from its own riverfront. And, as I hope to have shown here, it also separated downtown Northampton from its historic meadows. How many town residents today even know that a major part of their city, perhaps historically the most important part of all, lies on the other side of I-91? And an interstate highway is not something you cross lightly—in fact, you can't really cross it at all; if you tried, you'd either get killed or ticketed. There are, as we've seen, a couple of underpasses, but these are hidden and not exactly pedestrian friendly. I'd lived here for three years before I even knew I could get to the other side of the highway by walking or driving to the end of Hockanum Street. But it's not just the inconvenience of getting across that is a problem. The interstate severed Northampton's heart from its body. And it sundered the present-day city from its past, a past in which the vast, fertile floodplain by the Connecticut River and the gentle uplands beside it were one.

Can anything be done to mitigate this loss? Clearly, the interstate isn't going anywhere. And, despite the rise of farmers' markets and community gardens, the declining presence of agriculture in our lives is not likely to be reversed in our lifetime. That leaves efforts to ease the privatization



U.S. Geological Survey map of Northampton and vicinity (1964, photo-revised, 1979), compiled from the Easthampton and Mt. Holyoke quadrangles, 7.5 minute series (topographic) (detail).

and enclosure of the meadows by local landowners, with apparent municipal support. I wonder: can't the city do more to reconnect the town proper with its oldest and most important agricultural district? Can't it better educate town residents about the history of the meadows and provide for their reasonable public use, making access to the area safer and easier while still protecting the rights of property owners there? Wouldn't increased public access and reasonable public use of the meadows decrease the criminal activity occurring there?



The Northampton meadows. *Photo courtesy of Melissa Mahoney.*⁸

OF COURSE, I don't know enough about zoning, floodplains, and property rights to take a hard line on any of this. I didn't grow up here, and I know neither the town nor its meadows as well as others do. But I know what my life has been like during the last few years. And perhaps, in the end, this essay has been less about its putative topic than about its author: a middle-aged man who moved late in life to a new city and tried to find his way in and about it, walking its streets, visiting its shops and restaurants, bars and galleries, paying attention to everything around him—only to discover after several years that he had overlooked its most important part. At the height of his knowledge, he found himself gazing out on acres and acres of his own ignorance.

In his essay "Walking," Thoreau writes:

My vicinity affords many good walks; and though for so many years I have walked almost every day, and sometimes for several days together, I have not yet exhausted them. . . . There is in fact a sort of harmony discoverable between the capabilities of the landscape within a circle of ten miles' radius, or the limits of an afternoon walk, and the three score years and ten of human life. It will never become quite familiar to you.

How humbling! To think for so long that you are king of your domain and then, one day, to realize that you were all along unaware—that there was a door in your neighborhood that you never thought to open, that you didn't even know was there, and that on the other side of that door was a whole other world: beautiful, vast, and so different from the one you lived in.

NOTES

¹ Timothy Dwight, in his 1821 *Travels*, gives the size of the meadows as 4,000 acres (Letter XXXIV), the same figure used by the City of Northampton's 2005 *Meadows Land Use Plan*.

² There was also a small river cutting through the hills (the Mill River, whose name gives some clue as to its eventual value to the settlers). In his 1898 *History of Northampton*, Joseph Trumbull adds another attraction of the area: it was full of fish and game. Both the fertility of the floodplain and the abundance of wildlife in the area were well known, by the way, to the native inhabitants.

³ Dwight later traveled to Hadley and then to the summit of Mt. Holyoke, where he describes the view north this way: "But the most exquisite scenery of the whole landscape is formed by the River, and its extended margin of beautiful intervals. The River turns four times to the East, and three times to the West, within twelve miles; and within that distance makes a progress of twenty-four. It is generally one-fourth of a mile wide, and its banks are beautifully alternated with a fringing of shrubs, green lawns, and lofty trees. The intervals, which in this view border it in continual succession, are fields containing from five hundred to five thousand acres, formed like terraced gardens, lowest near the River, and rising, as they recede from it, by regular gradations. These fields are distributed into an immense multitude of lots, separated only by imaginary lines, and devoted to all the various cultivation of the climate. Meadows are here seen, containing from five to five hundred acres, interspersed with beautiful and lofty forest trees rising everywhere at little distances, and at times with orchards of considerable extent, and covered with exquisite verdure. Here spread, also, vast expansions of arable ground, in which the different lots exactly resemble garden-beds, distinguishable from each other only by the different kinds of vegetation, and exhibiting all its varied hues from dark green of the maize to the brilliant gold of the barley. One range of these lots is separated from another by a straight road, running, like an alley, from one to two or three miles in length, with here and there a brook, or mill-stream, winding through the whole. A perfect neatness and brilliancy is everywhere diffused, without a neglected spot to tarnish the luster, or excite a wish in the mind for a higher finish. All these objects united present here a collection of beauties to which I know no parallel" (Letter XXXV).

⁴ According to Trumbull, "To the owner of each home lot were granted other lands, meadow, upland or plain land. The meadows were generally divided into small lots, no individual having all his meadow land in one place. The number of acres awarded to different persons varied. Some had but eight or ten acres, while others obtained from thirty to fifty. Meadow lots usually contained three, six, eight, ten or more acres, and those having the largest quantity held a number of lots, sometimes widely separated from each other" (20). Later, Trumbull notes that "The rule adopted for dividing meadow land was fifteen acres to the head of a family, three acres to a son" (22). Of colonial Northampton, he writes, "Everybody in town . . . owned meadow land" (41).

⁵ Trumbull details the intricate rules established by the town to maintain the meadow fence and uses them to cast the floodplain as a kind of commons: "The

meadows, though divided into small parcels, were in many respects considered as common lands. While each citizen had the right of proprietorship in certain tracts, the community held the right of general control for the good of the whole" (41; see also 34, 124).

⁶ Dwight, in his *Travels* (Letter XXXIII), describes the advantages of New England's method of settlement, in which farmers lived close together in compact villages and went out daily, each to his dispersed holdings, to work. Obviously, there was some inconvenience in this arrangement, but it contributed, writes Dwight, to strong churches and schools. It even shaped residents' character. Dwight says that "persons who live on scattered plantations are in a great measure cut off from that daily intercourse which softens and polishes man." After presenting a contrasting picture of how the land was settled elsewhere in the United States, with families living on widely dispersed farms, Dwight praises New England, where "almost the whole country is covered with villages, and every village has its church and its suit[e] of schools."

⁷ See Keith Wilbur's 1987 drawing of Native American homeland sites in the Northampton area at Historic Northampton.

⁸ I wrote the first draft of this essay for students in my English 350 *Expository Writing* class at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in the fall of 2011. I shared a revised version with my fall 2012 students. One of those students, Melissa Mahoney, took this photograph, while flying above Northampton with her friend Philip McGilvray and his flight instructor. For more on my English 350 course, see <http://people.umass.edu/dfleming/english350.html>

Copyright of Massachusetts Review is the property of Massachusetts Review, Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.