

THE TOWN PROPRIETORS IN VERMONT:
THE NEW ENGLAND TOWN PROPRIETORSHIP
IN DECLINE

BY

FLORENCE MAY WOODARD, M. A.

*Assistant Professor of Economics
University of Vermont*

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
IN THE
FACULTY OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY



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INTRODUCTION

IN a country which is largely agricultural the land system is of paramount significance. The American colonies were essentially agricultural and there developed in different sections land systems adapted to the varying regional needs. One of the most outstanding and distinctive of these was the New England proprietary system. In this system the General Court made original grants to groups of proprietors who held the land in common but absolute ownership, unhampered by feudal restrictions, exercising exclusive control over its distribution and sale and being collectively responsible for its development.¹ As time passed, they distributed the land among themselves as personal holdings and made grants to those whom they voted into membership and to others who became inhabitants of the town. As an organized body they were known as the propriety and existed until the common and undivided lands were distributed. This distribution, usually, was not wholly accomplished by the original proprietors but was completed by their heirs and successors in succeeding generations. When the distribution was complete the organization terminated.² These organizations of proprietors were so prevalent in colonial New England that there was no land system apart from the body of proprietors.³

¹ R. H. Akagi, *The Town Proprietors of the New England Colonies* (Philadelphia, 1924), p. 3. This is the most recent and reliable source of information concerning the proprietors of colonial New England and their significance in the life of the township.

² *Ibid.*, p. 290.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

Many studies have heretofore been made of the New England town proprietors. They have contributed valuable information concerning the proprietary system in the older New England colonies, particularly during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. No study, however, has been made of the propriety as it developed in the New England frontier in the latter half of the eighteenth century. During this period the system of proprietorship continued to be the dominant land system, but it had departed in many respects from the generally accepted form of colonial New England during the preceding one hundred years.⁴

The object of the present study is to round out the historical treatment by presenting a detailed account of the system during the eighteenth century in that part of the frontier now known as Vermont. Such an account will definitely show the departure which the frontier system made from its older prototype.

To appreciate adequately the story of the decline of the New England town proprietorship as shown in the Vermont organizations, a description of the system in colonial New England will be presented as well as an interpretation of why it originated as the established land system in that area.⁵

⁴ *Ibid.* Dr. Akagi indicates that change characterized the proprietary system after the middle of the eighteenth century and develops the contributing factors. The treatment is very general. No specific proprietors' organizations are dealt with to show the actual departure from the earlier procedure; therefore, inconsistencies occur. An illustration of such inconsistency is the fact that the author draws on certain features of selected Vermont town proprieties to illustrate the colonial New England proprietary system during the period in which it had reached its most effective organization and again to illustrate the system in a later period when it was definitely in decline.

⁵ *Ibid.*, see also chs. ii, iii, iv and v.

M. Egleston, *The Land System of the New England Colonies* (Johns-Hopkins University. Studies in History and Political Science, vol. iv, nos. 11-12).

The above authorities have been freely referred to in presenting the description of the New England town proprietors of the colonial period.

The description of the Vermont town proprietors will be accomplished by means of a detailed study of the town proprieties of Windsor and of Hyde Park. The former has been selected to illustrate the proprietary system at work under the New Hampshire government which issued its charter and set up the legal provisions governing the system of proprietorship. The latter has been selected to demonstrate the system at work under the Vermont government which issued its charter and provided the legal provisions under which it functioned. These two cases have been selected because their records are available and because they appear representative of the proprietary system as a whole in that frontier region.

The story of the Windsor propriety will be presented first because chronologically it takes precedence. In addition, the great difficulty which it and other Vermont proprieties encountered in defending their land titles as a result of the boundary dispute between New Hampshire and New York was the outstanding factor which contributed to the formation of Vermont as a new state. The story of the rise of the new state and the land system which it adopted will follow the chapter dealing with the Windsor propriety and thereby serve as a background for the description of the Hyde Park organization. The study will be concluded by a summary of the factors which contributed to the decline of the New England proprietary system.

The sources upon which this study has been based are many and varied. Besides the general accounts of colonial and Vermont history, my chief sources have been the proprietors' records and the land deeds of Windsor and Hyde Park; the statutes of New Hampshire; and the statutes and journals of the Vermont Assembly.

I acknowledge my indebtedness to Mr. Karl W. Perkins, Town Clerk of Windsor, Vermont; to Mr. Brigham W.

McFarland, Town Clerk of Hyde Park, Vermont, and to his assistant, Miss Sarah B. Chapin, for so generously providing access to the records of both towns. The late Mr. Henry S. Wardner of New York City and Windsor, Vermont, gave me much helpful criticism and many constructive suggestions in connection with the chapters dealing with the Windsor propriety. The officials of the Baker Memorial Library at Dartmouth College have placed at my disposal a large portion of the material for the New Hampshire background of the Windsor organization. Mr. Harold G. Rugg, the Assistant Librarian has been particularly helpful in locating the early Vermont sources. Mr. Otis G. Hammond, Director of the New Hampshire Historical Society, has been very generous in allowing me the use of New Hampshire material in the Society's Library. Mr. George E. Bowman, Secretary and Editor of the Massachusetts Society of Mayflower Descendants, extended a real privilege in allowing me to read the Jabez Fitch Diary which is now in the possession of the Society.

At the University of Vermont, the Wilbur Collection has made available to me the Vermont statutes. The Billings Library has cooperated in providing further material. Dr. George G. Groat of the Economics Department has given a great deal of encouragement and valuable criticism.

I am indebted to Dr. Vladimir G. Simkhovitch of Columbia University for the stimulation of my interest in land systems which led to the selection of the Vermont proprietors as the basis of this study. I especially acknowledge my indebtedness to Dr. Carter Goodrich of Columbia University under whose direction and guidance this study has been made and whose criticism and advice have been invaluable in bringing it to completion.

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V I T A

FLORENCE MAY WOODARD was born in Kingsbury, Quebec, on October 22, 1900. Her preparatory education was received at Lennoxville Academy, Lennoxville, Quebec, and People's Academy, Morrisville, Vermont. She attended the University of Vermont and was graduated with the degree of Ph.B. in 1922. In 1922-1923 she was an assistant in economics at the University of Vermont. From 1923-1926 she was an instructor at the same institution. In 1926 she began graduate work in economics at Columbia University and received her M.A. degree in 1927. From 1927-1929 she was assistant professor of economics at the University of Vermont. While on leave of absence from Vermont in 1929-1931 she returned to Columbia to continue study for the Ph.D. In 1930-1931 she was an assistant in the department of sociology and economics at Barnard College. Since then she has resumed her duties at the University of Vermont. She has published "Agricultural Vermont," *Economic Geography*, Volume VIII, 1932, jointly with S. Axel Anderson.

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