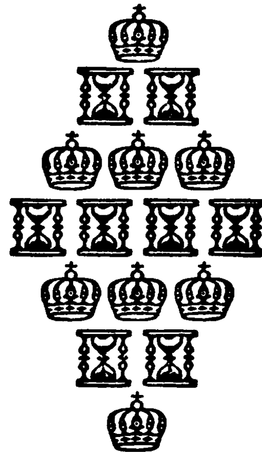
Early Days on BOSTON COMMON

By

Mary Farwell Ayer

With many Illustrations after Old Prints



BOSTON
Privately Printed
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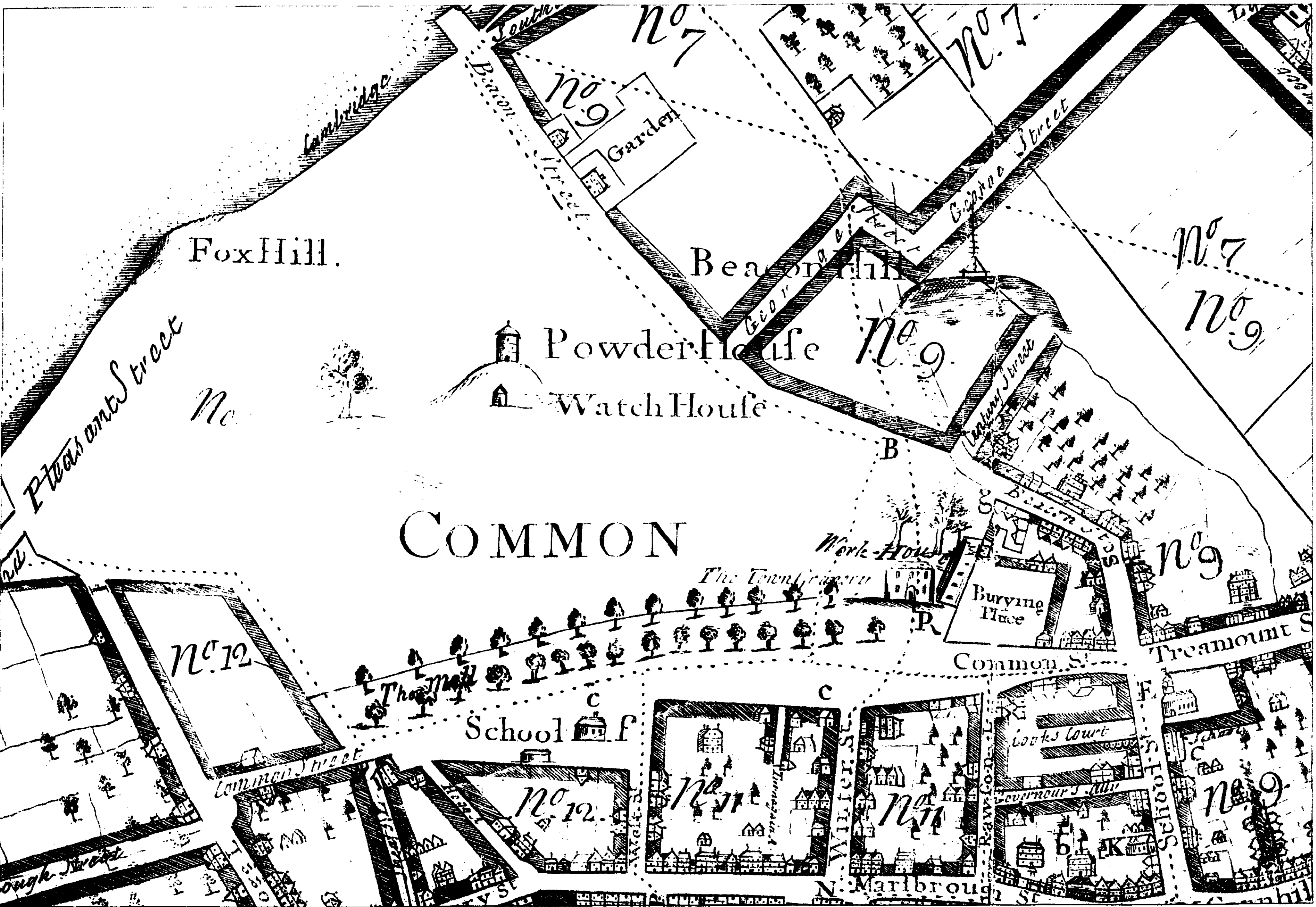

Fox Hill.
Cambridge
Pleasant Street
Beacon Street
Garden
Beacon Hill
George Street
Powder House
Watch House
COMMON
Work-House
The Town Granary
Burying Place
The Mall
School
Common St.
Treamount St
Common Street
Winter St.
Marlbrough St
School St.
Cooks Court
Governour's Ally
West St.
Turnagain A.

EARLY DAYS ON BOSTON COMMON

I

IN 1630 the Puritans under the leadership of John Winthrop left Salem, and joined the small settlement already established at Charlestown. It was not long, however, before they became greatly dissatisfied with the place, for the lack of fresh water caused much suffering. Many died before the kind-hearted William Blackstone, out of pity for them in their distress, appeared with an invitation to settle on his side of the Bay. The Governor, finding on investigation that the water supply of Shawmut was so good that it made it a desirable location, accepted this kind offer, and almost immediately moved his colony across the harbor.

By 1634 the Reverend Mr. Blackstone, grown weary of his neighbors, decided to move to a more retired spot, but before his departure he sold out his interest in the peninsula for the sum of thirty pounds.[1]

The colonists gave Blackstone permission to retain fifty acres of land on condition that he fenced it, but as he thought it worth while to fence in only six acres, these early settlers of Boston came into possession of practically all the peninsula.[2]

A document of 1685 signed by Charles Josias, alias Wampatuck, gives evidence to the fact that as early as 1630 the colonists had obtained a grant of all this land from the Indians.[3] When we add the evidence found in the Town Records, and the royal grant of 1629, we must admit that the early colonists had a legal right to the land.

The town life introduced into this new settlement was a reproduction of the village communal system of the ancient Germans. As far back as the time of Tacitus it was customary to reserve a part of each town for the people to hold in common. The customs of these early Germans foreshadowed the system introduced later into England of dividing the land into

[1] *Boston Town Records, vol. ii, November* 10, 1634. [2] *Deposition of Odlin and others regarding Blackstone's land,* 1684. [3] *Shurtleff, Topographical and Historical Description of Boston, page* 301.

arable, meadow and pasture land. By this Three Field system part of the land in each English town was kept for the common use of the townspeople. The scheme proved so successful in England that when the Pilgrims settled at Plymouth they were particular to set aside a certain portion of the land for a common field. There are at present two hundred acres in Plymouth known as town lands.[1]

When the Puritans settled in Boston they, too, naturally adopted this same system, and reserved a portion of the land for a common field. It was not long, however, before a meeting was held which almost did away with these town lands.

The inhabitants met on a lecture day in December to choose seven men to divide these lands, and in order to raise no opposition to the scheme they left out of office some of the most prominent men, "fearinge that the richer men would give the poorer sorte no great pportions of lande, but would rather leave a greate pte at lib'ty for new comers and for comon."[2] Fortunately the Reverend Mr. Cotton prevailed upon his townsmen to hold another meeting. The result was that a committee of prominent men was appointed to dispose of all the town lands excepting a portion which was to be reserved for newcomers and for town use.[3]

From this time on it was customary to allot small portions of this land to new settlers, and this custom so increased that the town authorities became alarmed at the gradual diminution of the open fields. The result was that at a town meeting held in 1640 it was decided that in future no land should be granted for house-plot or garden out of the common fields.[4] This resolution was closely adhered to, and even after Boston had become a city a section in the charter forbade the sale or lease of the Common.

The Town Records abound in orders regarding the management and care of the Common. It was decided in 1646 that "there shalbe kept on the Common bye the Inhabitants

[1] *Herbert B. Adams, The Germanic Origin of New England Towns, in Johns Hopkins University Studies, vol. i.* [2] *John Winthrop, History of New England.*
[3] *Boston Town Records, vol. ii,* 18 : 10 : 1634. [4] *Ibid., vol. ii,* 30 : 1 : 1640.

of the towne but 70 milch kine," and that "no dry cattell, yonge Cattell, or horse shalbe free to goe on the Common this year; but on[e] horse for Elder Oliver."[1] A few years later it was ordered that no person put more than one cow on the Common, though if a man preferred, he could keep four sheep in place of one cow. A keeper received "two shillings and six penc the head for every Cow that goes theare"[2] and eight-pence for sheep, threepence for lambs.[3]

The cows were often a menace to persons walking or riding through these fields. One fatal accident occurred in 1661 when General Humphrey Atherton, on his way home from reviewing the troops, came against a cow in the darkness with such force that he was thrown from his horse and killed.

Very strict rules were made against digging sods and mowing grass in the Common. The only place where the colonists could obtain gravel was from Fox Hill, a small piece of land jutting out into the water, which was torn down later to fill in the land where the Public Garden now is. In 1665 this hill and the surrounding marsh were leased to Major Leverett for forty years, for the sum of thirty shillings, on the condition that liberty be granted to the inhabitants to "fetch Sand or Clay from the sd Hill."[4] Stone and rocks for building material, however, were often taken from the Common, for in 1693 Samuel Sewall wrote that the foundation for the cellar of his new house was finished by stones out of the Common.[5]

The Common of 1650 comprised a large tract of land covered for the most part with rocks and bushes. It had no exact limits, but extended from the water up over the slope beyond our present Park Street. At the foot of the Common were mud flats stretching far out into the water, which were usually referred to as "the marsh at the bottom of the Common." In the midst of this large extent of pasture-land stood Fox Hill, Powder-house Hill, Flagstaff Hill and the hill crowned later by the watch-house.[6]

[1] *Boston Town Records, vol. ii,* 18 : 3 : 1646. [2] *Ibid., vol. ii,* 29 : 1 : 1652.
[3] *Ibid., vol. ii,* 27 : 2 : 1657. [4] *Ibid., vol. vii,* 26 : 12 : 1665. [5] *Sewall's Diary, May* 27, 1693.
[6] *See Price's map, facing page* 4; *also German map, facing page* 6.

Powder-house Hill was the most prominent of the four. It was probably on this hill that James and Peter Oliver placed a windmill in 1652. It was not the only windmill in this part of the town, however, for three years earlier Thomas Painter had received the right to erect a mill on Fox Hill, on payment of an annual rent of forty shillings.[1]

At the foot of these hills were three small ponds, where the cattle delighted in gathering. Frog Pond was the largest, the other two were filled up later. Horse Pond was a small pool, while Sheehan's Pond, which derived its name from a poor culprit hanged near it in the next century, was merely a marshy place.

The cows were more fortunate in finding water than shade, for early maps show but three trees on the Common.[2] One was doubtless the famous elm, which stood near the Frog Pond; the other two were apparently nearer Park Street.

Lydia Hancock, the wife of Thomas Hancock, claimed that the old elm had been planted by her grandfather, Hezekiah Henchman, while another informer asserted that it had been placed there by his son, Daniel Henchman. There is probably no truth, however, in either of these claims, for from the number of rings counted at its fall in 1876 it was doubtless growing as early as 1630.[3]

Tradition asserts that many of the early executions in Boston took place on a limb of this tree. Many persons were tried and condemned to death during the seventeenth century. Annie Hibbins and Margaret Jones suffered death during the witchcraft delusion, while the Quakers William Robinson and Marmaduke Stephenson were ordered to be hanged. Mary Dyer, another believer in the Quaker doctrines, had been warned to leave the town, but as she persisted in returning, Governor Endicott persuaded the reluctant court to order her execution.[4]

[1] *Boston Town Records, vol. ii, 27 : 6 : 1649. See Price's map opposite.*

[2] *These three trees on the Common are clearly represented in a map made in 1722 by Captain John Bonner.* [3] *Shurtleff, Topographical and Historical Description of Boston.*

[4] *Richard P. Hallowell, The Quaker Invasion of Massachusetts. Mr. Hallowell has referred me to Bishop's New England Judged, where is written: "Mary Dyer, whom your barbarous Hands*

Although old Jethro, the Indian, and some of the Quakers may have met their death by being hanged from a limb of this elm, others probably died on the gallows erected temporarily on the Common. Proof for their existence is apparently given in the Town Records, which mention in one place that the gallows had been removed to the next knoll. It was probably by this means that some of the Quakers died, for in 1685 Judge Sewall wrote: "A Quaker or two goe to the Governour and ask leave to enclose the Ground the Hanged Quakers are buried in under or near the Gallows, with Pales; Governour proposed it to the Council who unanimously denyed it as very inconvenient for persons so dead and buried in the place to have any Monument."[1]

Another method of punishment was by shooting rather than by hanging. Many Indians were killed in this way. In 1678 eight Indians were shot to death in the Common on Windmill Hill, while in that year another Indian, old Matoonas, was killed in the same manner.

Minor offences were punished by whippings administered at the whipping-post. One stood for many years on State Street, but to judge from Sewall's Diary, another was probably erected later on the Common: "A Whiping-Post is set up by the middle Watch-House."[2]

In 1660 the first steps were taken towards building an almshouse for the maintenance of the poor of Boston. The selectmen granted land out of the Common for the purpose, and on the corner of our Park and Beacon streets an almshouse was soon erected.[3] Twenty years later it was burned down, but

Slew, and Hung upon a Tree." Bishop speaks of Robinson and Stevenson being met "in your Train-Field." At the execution place their bodies were allowed to fall to the ground, and were later put "in a Pit in an open Field which was soon covered with Water."

Thomas Story, who visited Boston in 1699, wrote: "We proceeded on our journey to Rhode Island and Boston; near which, on a green, we observed a pair of gallows; and being told that was the place where several of our friends had suffered death for the truth, and had been there thrown into a hole, we rode a little out of the way to see it, and as we sat on horseback by the pit, were drawn into right silence."

This evidence seems to point to the execution place being on the Common.

[1] *Sewall's Diary, June 17, 1685. Gallows also stood on the Neck, so this may not refer to gallows on the Common.* [2] *Sewall's Diary, October 1, 1688.* [3] *See frontispiece; also Price's map, facing page 4.*

was rebuilt in 1686 on the same land. It was a two-story building with a gambrel roof, to which a wing was added later. There was a fence around it, through which the poor little urchins were in the habit of thrusting their hands to beg for alms.[1] There were often passers-by, for a lane ran from Beacon Hill down through School Street, and in 1662 a highway had been laid out in front of the almshouse "from the Centery hill to the Common."[2]

The almshouse was paid for by legacies and subscriptions from the townspeople, and was managed by a board of overseers appointed for the purpose. Besides being used as a poorhouse it also served as a hospital and as an asylum for the insane, but it was too poorly endowed to be well managed in any of its capacities. Until the building of the workhouse it was often referred to as the workhouse; in fact the names were used indiscriminately.

The house of Samuel Davis stood "at the end of the Almeshouse adjoyning to the buryinge place," probably near the site of the Boston Athenæum.[3] Below this building was waste land stretching down to the burial-place.[4] This land was taken from the Common in 1660 in order to form a second burial-place. In 1677 steps were taken towards fencing it in, for it was ordered that Mr. John Woodmansey "remoue the Fence of the new buryinge [place] out into the Comon about 50 Foote as staked out."[5]

At this time some sort of a fence doubtless existed on the Common, for as early as 1634 an order had been passed in regard to fencing in a field which seems to have been in this part of the town. From time to time this fence was repaired and other fences were added, though it was probably not until 1735 that the Common was properly enclosed.[6]

The greater part of these common fields remained a waste tract of land, only suitable for pasture, and with the exception

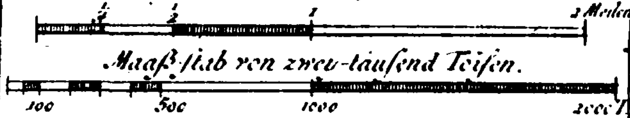
[1] *Shurtleff, Topographical and Historical Description of Boston.* [2] *Boston Town Records, vol. vii,* 25 : 6 : 1662. [3] *Boston Town Records, vol. vii,* 30 : 1 : 1671. [4] *See Price's map, facing page 4.* [5] *Boston Town Records, vol. vii, October* 29, 1677. [6] *Shurtleff, Topographical and Historical Description of Boston.*

GRUNDRISS VON DER STADT BOSTON

und ihren Gegenden

Anzeige der Plœtze in der Stadt Boston

A. *Batterie von 25 Stück Canonen.*
B. *Batterie von 16 Stück Canonen.*
C. *Batterie von 25 Stück Canonen.*
D. *Nord-kirche der Presbiterianer.*
E. *Quaquer kirche.*
F. *Rath haus.*
G. *Anabaptisten kirche.*
H. *Waffen-platz.*
J. *Fanal od. Leucht-thurm.*
K. *Hohe Warte mit einer Schildwache.*
L. *Pulver-magazin.*
M. *Mühle und kleiner Damm.*
N. *Kleines Becken welches bey der Ebbe trocken ist.*
O. *Zucht-haus u. Gefængniße.*
P. *Sud-kirche der Presbiterianer.*
Q. *Land-thor welches durch einen Graben und 2 Batterien vertheidigt wird.*



of the training-field and a portion rented to brickmakers was given over to the cattle of the townspeople.

Ever since their settlement at Shawmut, the colonists had lived in fear of an Indian attack. As early as 1634 a beacon had been erected on Beacon Hill, so that in case of any sudden danger a signal might be given to warn the neighboring towns.[1] One day of the week had also been set aside as a training-day, when drills were held on the Common.[2]

The custom of settling disputes by duel began at an early period in Boston. Towards the end of the seventeenth century there is mention of a duel fought on the Common between Peggy and Captain Cole, and a few years later another duel occurred, for which each duellist was obliged to pay the sum of ten pounds.

Besides using the Common for a duelling-place, the men and boys were accustomed to turn it into their playground. Favorite games were wicket and flinging the bullet. The latter sport, especially, was practised to such an extent as to endanger the lives of passers-by, and the town authorities found it necessary at the beginning of the next century to restrict it.

Very rigid rules were also made against Sabbath-breaking. No game of any kind could be played on that day, either at home or in the Common. The authorities went even farther than this, for one resolution read that if any horse was seen in the Common on the Sabbath, the owner must pay five shillings.[3]

A visitor in Boston about this time was much impressed with the strict method of keeping the Sabbath, and declared that even on the hottest days in summer the people were forbidden to stroll on the Common.[4]

On week days, however, it was a favorite resort for both walking and riding. The shore at the foot of the Common also served as a landing-place for persons crossing by water from Cambridge. Sewall wrote several years later: "Rode to

[1] *See Price's map, facing page* 4; *also frontispiece.* [2] *In his History of New England, Winthrop mentions the visit of La Tour to Boston in* 1643. *La Tour was granted permission to exercise his soldiers on shore, and "landed* 40 *men in their arms. They were brought into the field by our train band, consisting of* 150, *and in the forenoon they only beheld our men exercise."*

[3] *Boston Town Records, vol. vii,* 5 : 6 : 1672. [4] *Bennett, History of New England.*

Commencemt. . . . Had a pleasant passage home by water with Mr. Wendell and his Family. Landed at the bottom of the Common."[1]

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the town of Boston was subjected to many epidemics of smallpox. Many efforts were made to stay the disease, but until the introduction of the practice of inoculation all were in vain. An attempt was made in the seventeenth century, however, to guard against spreading the infection, for an order in the Town Records recommended that the clothes of diseased persons be laid out during the night on a certain part of the Common.[2] In spite of all precaution, however, many colonists died of the disease and were buried in the Common or Granary Burial-Ground.

In spite of epidemics the town continued to increase both in numbers and in power. Ever since the first settlement of Boston the home government had allowed the colony of Massachusetts to govern itself. Under the governorship of such men as Winthrop, Vane and Endicott the colony had been placed in a flourishing condition, and was each year becoming more and more independent. By the middle of the century, therefore, the King began to fear that he would lose the colonies unless their freedom was curtailed. This feeling became so strong in the reign of King Charles II that in 1684 the colonial charter was annulled, and the right of government was taken away in part from the colonies.

The reign of Charles was brought to a close before he had time to establish a new form of government, and his successor, King James II, allowed matters to remain as they were until 1686. In that year he appointed Colonel Kirk governor, but this appointment falling through, he delegated Joseph Dudley to act as president until the arrival of a governor.

The King, in December of this same year, sent over Edmund Andros to act as governor until a definite form of government could be arranged. Before this result had been ef-

[1] *Sewall's Diary, July 6, 1720.* [2] *Boston Town Records, vol. vii, May 6, 1678.*

fected, however, William of Orange had landed in England, and had driven James from the throne.

The inhabitants of Boston were much dissatisfied with Andros, who made the power of the Crown felt by restricting them in many ways.

When the rumor reached Boston in 1689 that William had arrived in England, without waiting for confirmation of the report, they arose in revolt, and imprisoned Andros and other obnoxious officers of the Crown. On the night of that eighteenth of April, when the hated representatives of the King's authority were safely locked up in the fort, there was doubtless a noisy celebration on the Common, for the people felt that for a short time at least they were free from restraint.[1]

Increase Mather and the other representatives of the colonies in London tried to prevail upon the new king to give back the old charter, but on this point King William remained firm. He promised to recall Andros for trial, but said that in future the colony must be ruled by a governor appointed by the Crown.

The new charter, which reached Boston in 1692, changed the Colony of Massachusetts Bay into the Province of Massachusetts Bay, and William Phips was the first of the ten royal governors sent over to govern the province. From the end of this inter-charter period until the evacuation of Boston the town was never free to govern itself.

[1] *The Common, even at this late period, was not entirely free from robbers and highwaymen. Lawrence Hammond wrote in his diary, June* 9, 1688: "*This Evening Mr. Sampson Sheafe was set upon in Boston Common & knockt downe & robbed by two Ruffins, One Humbleton being present, who it is judged, hyred them to do it.*"