

Lands and Family: The Richards Farm, Dedham, Massachusetts¹

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Over the past decade a new chapter has been added to the history of colonial New England towns. Writers have drawn on the resources of available public documents—tax lists, probated wills and inventories, land deeds, selectmen's minutes and court records—to depict the institutional, economic and social development of New England during its first two centuries.² In so doing, they have provided a valuable supplement, and often a revision, of the countless town histories published during the American centennial period.

Modern writers have also begun to explore the lifestyles of colonists previously ignored by history: the "silent majority" of men and women who left few if any personal records and whose reputations did not extend beyond their small communities. The Richards family, living in Dedham, Massachusetts, for over 150 years, was part of this group. Although many Richards men were well-known in the town, few wielded any influence outside its borders. Their histories take up only a few pages in a ponderous family genealogy.³

A recent attempt to trace the ownership of a plot of land in what is now the town of Dover led to an unexpected amount of information about the Richards family. By focussing on land ownership and inheritance, the passage of land ownership could be traced through the expanding number of Dedham Richards to the son in each generation who received the homestead as his legacy. This line broke down in the

eighteenth century. Generations began to overlap and sons built their own farms away from the family home. By the time of the Revolution the dissolution was complete: eight sons in the fifth generation moved to different locations and occupations, and the Richards homestead finally passed out of family ownership.

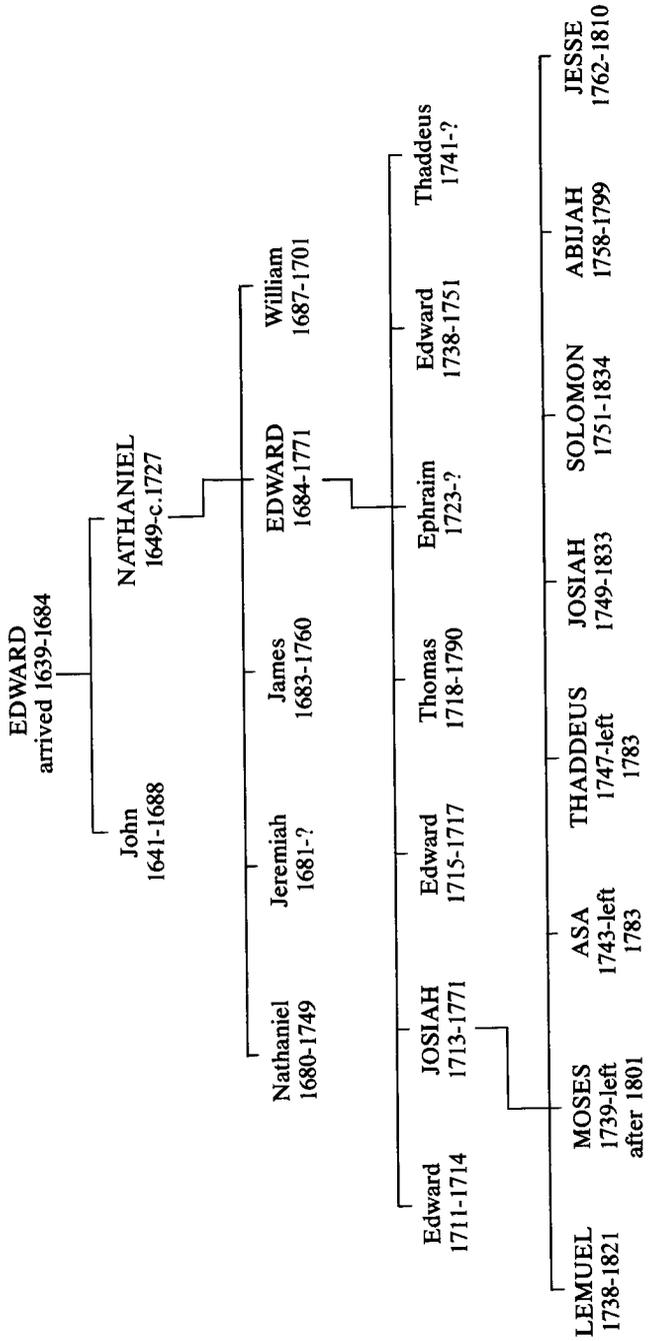
Change infrequently affords a simple explanation. The changes in land ownership and use by the Richards family, as well as the changing significance of land in their economic lives, reflect patterns pointed out in a number of recently published community histories. The Richards family is a case study in the development of the New England town.

I

The "closed corporate community" of Dedham, as Kenneth Lockridge has described it,⁴ was three years old when Edward Richards arrived in 1639. Dedham, like other first generation settlements in Massachusetts Bay, was inhabited by men who were at the same time proprietors and settlers. They owned specific homelots in the town, worked certain fields and pastures in common and held the remaining vast acreage of the land grant in trust, to be granted to future community members. Richards had to obtain approval from these

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Table 1. A GENEALOGICAL CHART OF PART OF THE RICHARDS FAMILY IN DEDHAM
(By the author)



“town fathers” in order to own land in the community. He also had to accept civic responsibilities such as road-building, militia duty and fenceviewing—necessary concomitants of land ownership on the seventeenth-century frontier.

Edward Richards, described in the town record as a shoemaker, was permitted to buy a twelve-acre houselot in the town center⁵ the year after he married Susanna Hunting, daughter of one of the church elders. By making that purchase, thereby becoming a “proprietor,” Richards was committing himself to much more than building a house and making a living. He was buying a share of the town, much as a modern stockholder buys shares in a corporation. The proprietors set a self-imposed limit to their numbers, the economic benefit of which was a secure knowledge that, in future years, they and their descendants would control enough acreage for each to live well and to see their children prosper.

Edward Richards’s twelve acres were his twelve shares in the company, and for the rest of his life he collected dividends on them. He received grants of meadow and marshland, upland and pasture, whenever he and the other proprietors voted to give themselves a dividend. His beginnings were those of a small stockholder, and the returns on his investment were also relatively small: five acres of woodland here, two acres of swamp there.⁶ These small lots accumulated, however, so that by 1653, fourteen years after Edward’s anonymous arrival in Dedham, his holdings totalled over fifty-five acres. His relative economic standing in the town had risen also: from twentieth to twelfth highest among seventy-eight property holders. As his financial status improved, so did the prestige of the civic positions he held, beginning as the mundane though necessary fenceviewer and moving up to influential roles as selectman and constable.

Sometime between 1653 and 1657 Richards made the one major land purchase of his life: a 150-acre tract south of the Charles River, known as “Mr. Cook’s Farme.” By this one act he guaranteed his family economic security for three generations as well as establishing himself as one of Dedham’s three most powerful citizens during the rest of his own life. We do not know how much he paid for this land, since the deed of sale has been lost, but a slightly earlier deed for the same property records payments of sixty-seven pounds, fourteen shillings for the “farm, part meadow, part upland; . . . next Charles River as it lyeth . . . bounded betwixt a little brooke and certain Rocks.”⁷ The land was untouched by any except the Natick Indians who had lived on it earlier; the natural meadow provided fresh hay, the “upland” would yield valuable acres of pasture and plowland when it was cleared.

An important secondary benefit of Richards’s purchase resulted from his higher status among Dedham land owners. When unassigned lands were divided among the proprietors, they were allotted in proportion to a man’s relative ranking in the town. “Rank,” in the hierarchical society of seventeenth-century Massachusetts Bay, was determined by a complex formula involving the proprietors’ estimation of a man’s character, his social background, and his taxable economic worth.⁸ A sizeable increase in real estate holdings increased his tax bills—but it also increased the amount of acreage he could claim. Richards, jumping from twelfth to third highest in Dedham tax valuations, qualified for larger shares in subsequent town land divisions.

Much that is visible of Edward Richards’s later life points to his concern with protecting the land holdings he had built up. He instigated a court action against the Reverend John Elliot’s interpretation of a land grant to the Natick

Indians; he protested to the selectmen that people were surreptitiously stealing land by fencing in more than they owned. Recently he appeared in the records as fenceviewer or woodreeve. Twice Richards received the town's permission to cut wood on town lands for fencing, and again he drew on Dedham's vast timber reserves for timbers to "build a bridge over Charles River unto his meadow."⁹ Although he continued to live in the town center until he died, Richards was clearly beginning to exploit his "farme" across the river, and he was defending its boundaries as the inheritance of his sons.

In 1684 when Edward Richards died, he left two married sons. John, the elder, lived nearby in a house he had built for his family, while Nathaniel shared the homestead with his father. Edward's holdings, though vaguely described, were impressive. They included a half-celled house and its furnishings plus other buildings on the home lots, the "remainder of Mr. Cook's Farme," and acreage in seven other locations throughout Dedham. Edward's will listed sizeable cash and "country pay" bequests and instructed John and Nathaniel to divide the real estate, valued at £161, at their mother's death. Finally, "in case my son Nathaniel do bring up one of his Sons to learning I give to that Grandchilde Sixty pound toward it."¹⁰ This last gift was a statement of Richards family values, since Nathaniel's eldest child was only four at the time of Edward's death.

After Edward's initial adventure of coming to the New World, he showed no sign of having gambled with his fortunes. His was a vision of limited, though steady gain, physically circumscribed by the boundaries of the developing town in which he established himself, and socially defined by responsible participation in that town's government. Private and public goals were seldom at odds, for his own family's secu-

rity, like that of Dedham, rested in a cautious and controlled development of the economic and human resources at hand. Edward lived long enough to see his children marry into local families whose prominence in town affairs continued throughout the next century, and he died with the comfortable knowledge that the prosperity he had built in his lifetime was sufficient to see his grandsons well off in Dedham.

II

Whether Edward was aware of the vast changes taking place in his town by the time of his death is a moot question. That his son Nathaniel was, and took part in the process of change during his long life, is incontrovertible. By 1684 Dedham was no longer a fragile outpost on the colony's frontier,¹¹ nor was it a "closed corporation." The proprietors' power to reject new settlers was held in reserve for those who were potential indigents, and in less than thirty years the town tripled its population. Demand for land rose accordingly and the proprietors sold much of the undivided town acreage. The era of free land dividends was all but over: Nathaniel and John received final allotments of approximately thirty-five acres each in 1687.

Nathaniel's early life, as recorded by the town, showed no indication of the important changes to come. Born in 1649, Nathaniel was the fourth child and second of Edward's sons. He earned notice from the town selectmen when he collected bounty money for killing wolves, and again when he was fined for sitting "out of order" in the meeting house. Just before he married in 1679, he was granted town lumber to build an addition on his father's house.¹² After his marriage he began to repeat the adult pattern of his father's life. His first children were born regularly every one or two years, he was fenceviewer in

outlying areas where Edward had property, and he began paying taxes on the homestead addition which was his "new" house.

There were indications of change in the Richards family, however. Despite Nathaniel's acceptance of adult responsibilities, he was not recognized as an independent member of the Dedham community until his father's death in 1684. Unlike Edward, Nathaniel did not legally own any land until his father willed him the homelot and other properties. When Edward had come to Dedham in 1639, he had been required to take the freeman's oath as prerequisite to land ownership, a pledge of his involvement in the town's future. By contrast, Nathaniel was not admitted as a voting freeman of Dedham until middle age. Well before that time the town had assessed him for high taxes, had borrowed money from him and his brother, had even appointed him tax collector, but he was fifty-one before being granted the right to vote. The rights and responsibilities considered inseparable by an earlier generation were becoming separated as size and complexity broke apart the community which Dedham had been.

Attitudes toward land were also changing, and Nathaniel's land transactions during his lifetime anticipated a pattern followed by later generations of families across settled New England. He had inherited large quantities of land from Edward, and twenty years later, when his father-in-law died, he again inherited sizeable holdings through his wife's right. Some of the land acquired was traded or sold in order to consolidate his holdings south of the Charles River in the "Cook's Farme" area, referred to by 1705 as "Richards Farm."

As his older sons came of marriageable age, Nathaniel set them up on their own eighty-acre holdings across the river while Edward, his youngest son, continued to live at home with wife and young family, as

Nathaniel had done before him. Edward's continued presence on the home farm was essential to his aging father, especially as the number of acres under cultivation and improvement increased beyond the capacity of one man to farm alone. Again like Nathaniel, Edward did not become economically independent until well into his adult life. At the age of thirty-nine he received the homestead "with all the buildings, Edifices + orchards + improvements that are thereon"¹³ by deed of gift from his seventy-year-old father, besides land "at a place called Strawberry Hill."

Despite the distribution of much land to his sons, Nathaniel still owned enough property to sell more than seventy-five acres in numerous transactions over the years, thereby obtaining hard cash which was becoming increasingly necessary in the colonial economy.

In 1727, Nathaniel Richards "died very suddenly while sitting in his chair . . . in his seventy-ninth year."¹⁴ In his life he had been a rich man, an "upstanding member of the community," if not as influential as his father before him. He was, we assume, a conservative patriot and a good church member, since two of his last children were named after William and Mary of England. Nathaniel was not unlike a minor English country squire, and his life followed a pattern becoming common among the colonial landed gentry. His real wealth was embodied in land; his civic responsibilities were met by conscientious observance of duties as constable, fenceviewer, surveyor; his goals were attained in seeing his sons established on the family land. One son was "brought up to learning" as the first Edward had wished forty years before.

III

Edward Richards, youngest son in the third generation, was born a month after his grandfather died, and was consequently

named for him. His profile is much less clear than that of either his father or namesake. It is tempting to ascribe this vagueness to the deterioration of the Richardses' position in a growing Dedham. It would have been difficult, at best, for Edward to have wielded the influence in eighteenth-century Dedham that his grandfather had. An increasing number of political factions diffused the near monolithic power of seventeenth-century town government.¹⁵ Nowhere in the records do the same names appear with such consistency as they had in the early years of the settlement. In addition to increased competition for civic positions, Edward also had to contend with the rising cost of less available land. These factors may explain why, unlike his forebears', Edward's life passed almost unrecorded.

There is a sense that, from beginning to end, Edward's primary concern must have been the family farm. He was not the community leader that his grandfather—or even his father—had been. Brief references in the records do mark his promotion in the colonial militia from cornet to lieutenant, and he served fairly regularly in a variety of minor civic positions, while the hundred or more acres inherited from his father maintained him among the richest 15 percent of the town whose richer and poorer members were becoming increasingly polarized.

Edward lived to the age of eighty-seven, at which time all but two of his nine children had died. When he came to award land to the two sons who did live, he turned to that property that had been held in reserve by the family for over a hundred years—Richards Farm across the river “at a place called Strawberry Hill.” Both sons, Josiah and Thomas, were middle-aged when they received their patrimony; both had been married for a number of years and had built themselves houses on land they had bought near Strawberry Hill, possibly in expecta-

tion of being close to their eventual inheritance.

It was Josiah's and Thomas's misfortune, perhaps, that their father was at the same time so cautious and so virile, for it was not until their five brothers were dead, and Edward had married his third wife—twice widowed herself—that the Strawberry Hill land was finally apportioned. Edward was, in effect, “duty bound” both by family custom and cultural tradition to leave his lands equally divided among those of his sons who would have use for them. Unlike his father and grandfather whose acreage was large and whose sons were few, Edward probably held less than 150 acres total while, until 1751, he had at least four sons who might be expected to outlive him. Viewed in this light, Edward's gift of thirty acres on Strawberry Hill to Josiah in 1746, was effectively, a gift of Josiah's total inheritance.

IV

Thirty acres was a minimal amount of land to support a small farm family.¹⁶ It was certainly not enough to support fourteen children and to bequeath to eight sons. Josiah moved to Strawberry Hill when he was in his thirties, just before the French and Indian War. In so doing, he joined a growing number of Dedham residents living in this fringe area where the land, although rocky, was more fertile than the worn fields closer to town. Over the years he supplemented his acreage¹⁷ and by the time his children came of age he was sufficiently wealthy to advance them their inheritance in cash settlements. None of his sons received property until Josiah's will was probated in 1771.

The end of the third and fourth generations came at the same time. Edward, at the age of eighty-eight, outlived Josiah by barely a month. The final settlement of

their estates shows a remarkable similarity in condition between father and son: their household possessions were the same in type and value, almost to the penny, while there was only a twenty-seven pound difference in the worth of their lands.¹⁸ For Josiah's sons, these simultaneous deaths resulted in a dramatic alteration of their fortunes. In the space of a few months they became owners of sizeable land holdings, divided equally among them. The wills and inventories are too vague to know the exact amount of acreage inherited by each fifth generation Richards son, but a reasonable estimate would be between twenty-five and forty acres. This was enough to provide an agricultural foundation for each of them, had they chosen to follow family tradition.

Conditions and expectations had changed for the Richards family by 1771, however. Five of Josiah's eight sons were already adults at the time of his death, and had grown up knowing that their father's land was not enough to support all of them. The variety of occupational choices made by these men illustrates a change in expectations that became widespread over the course of the eighteenth century.

By the end of the seventeenth century young men could no longer look to the town to provide free lands for their future use. Within a few years of that time many could not expect their fathers to bequeath sufficient lands to fulfill their needs as full-time farmers, though it was still possible to make a favorable marriage and thereby increase their holdings.

As the eighteenth century progressed more and more farmers' sons had to rely on their own resources for support. These sons bought land for themselves, exploited their marketable crafts, or changed occupations altogether. The family home, as often as not, went to the eldest son rather than to the youngest who might still be

living at home. Reserves of land like Strawberry Hill were gradually put to full use. These were no longer outlying pastures and plowlands to supplement those of the home farm. They became home farms to the sons who planted them in orchards and gardens and who marked the differential use of their subdivisions by miles of stones dragged out of meadow and cleared land.

V

Not everything the Richards fifth generation did broke with family tradition. Some of Josiah's sons were old enough to see action in the French and Indian War; almost all did some military service during the Revolution. All of them married into local families. But Lemuel, the eldest, was born in 1738 while the eighth son, Jesse, born in 1762, was young enough to have been Lemuel's son. Between these two were Moses, Asa, Thaddeus, Josiah, Solomon and Abijah. The range of experiences which affected their lives made them react very differently to the legacies left by their father and grandfather, and their reactions resulted in the first major separation of the family since Edward Richards's arrival in Dedham 125 years earlier.

Lemuel, first-born of Josiah's children, married and settled on Strawberry Hill by 1771, after which he administered his father's estate for the next eight years. Referred to as "Gentleman" by 1777, he was a member of the Committee of Correspondence, a town selectman, constable, mortgage holder and firmly established Dedham landowner. Of all the sons, Lemuel most closely followed the life pattern of his forebears, while events surrounding the Revolution provided him the opportunity to develop his status in the community well above that of the preceding two generations.

Moses, the second son, also settled on

Strawberry Hill, but the visible facts of his early life center around fighting, both in the French and Indian War and during the early battles of the Revolution. Unlike Lemuel, Moses was always referred to as "yeoman" and in 1791 had to mortgage part of his land. Ten years later at the age of sixty-three, Moses gave up his holdings in Dedham and moved to Warwick, Rhode Island.

Asa, yeoman and cooper, was born in 1743; Thaddeus, a blacksmith, was born four years later. Of the two, only Asa appears clearly in the records, and it is apparent that he intended to stay in Dedham. After his father's death he bought three parcels of Josiah's land from his brothers, including those home farm buildings which had not been willed to their mother. He and Thaddeus built a tanhouse on the brook running through their Strawberry Hill property, but Noanet Brook was not a dependable water supply. In 1783 both brothers sold their Dedham lands to family members and moved to Ashford, Connecticut.

Josiah, fifth son of the fifth generation, had barely reached his majority when his father died. He took his shares of his father's and grandfather's estates in cash settlements and at the end of the war moved to the newly founded town of Washington, New Hampshire. He returned to Dedham only as an older man and died there.

Despite fifteen years' difference in age, Solomon Richards most closely resembled his oldest brother Lemuel, staking his future on the cultivation of his father's land. Captain and commanding officer of a cavalry company during the Revolution, Solomon returned to Dedham as a yeoman farmer and continued to buy lots of both his father's and grandfather's estates until 1786. However, overextension and a large family forced him to sell or mortgage six

different parcels over the next fifteen years. He sold his last property and moved to West Roxbury in 1804, at the age of fifty-three.

Abijah, the seventh son and youngest to remain in Dedham, was sixteen when his mother remarried in 1774. Abijah trained as a cooper like his older brother, and he stayed on at the home farm when Asa moved to Connecticut. He bought heavily on long-term credit, as many other young men did during this period. But Abijah died at the age of forty-one, before his debts were repaid, and his widow was "represented insolvent" to the probate court.

Youngest son Jesse moved to his stepfather's home in Roxbury in 1774. Most of his life was spent there, though the ties with Dedham were still visible in his marriage to a Dedham woman. He was a hatter and feltmonger, but despite the sale of inherited Dedham properties, he was sued for non-payment of debt in 1790 by his mother-in-law. Jesse died before the age of fifty.

By 1804, then, only Lemuel remained in Dedham as representative of this Richards family line. Distant cousins and nephews still lived nearby or in neighboring towns, but the economic guarantee of Edward Richards's shares in Dedham's future had run out. Most of Lemuel's brothers, even those who continued to farm some land, staked their futures on trades which only peripherally depended on the land—ash and oak for barrel staves, running water for the tanyard. The blacksmith's charcoal, like the hatter's fur or wool, was purchased. These trades were moveable, tied to the land only as a location for shop or forge which could be rebuilt elsewhere and produce income long before new fields could be cleared and harvested.

Change infrequently affords a simple explanation. Change came in the Richards family at the confluence of conditions which developed over the course of five

generations: the loss of land and impoverishment of it, the growth of trade and demand for manufactures, the settlement of new areas after wars during which men had left their towns and seen the world outside.

The Richardses are not an isolated example. Similar changes happened in

families throughout Dedham and other towns, eventually transforming the physical and social landscape. By 1800 the close-knit traditional New England community had evolved, family by family, into a new environment—itsself already changing even as the process of definition went on.

NOTES

¹ This study grew out of a continuing historical and archeological research project sponsored by the Dover Historical Society and funded in part by the Massachusetts Historical Commission.

² Sumner Chilton Powell pioneered this approach in his book *Puritan Village: The Formation of a New England Town* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1963). More recent books which have already become classics in community studies include: Richard L. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1967); Philip J. Grevan, Jr., *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1970); Kenneth A. Lockridge, *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years, Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636-1736* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1970). An interesting bicentennial study of Concord, Massachusetts, has recently been published which demonstrates how far the "town historian" has come since the centennial years. This is Robert A. Gross's *The Minutemen and Their World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976).

³ Abner A. Morse, *A Genealogical Register of the Descendants of Several Ancient Puritans*, vol. 3, *Richards*, (Boston: H. W. Dutton and Son, 1861).

⁴ Lockridge, *op. cit.*, see especially pp. 16-17.

⁵ *Early Records of the Town of Dedham, Massachusetts* (Dedham: The Dedham Transcript, 1892), vol. 3, 15 November 1639.

⁶ Swampland was not without value; it provided white cedar so much in demand locally for shingles and in England for shipbuilding.

⁷ William Parcke to Anthony Fisher, witnessed 20 November 1652, recorded 17 March 1673, Suffolk County Deeds, lib. 8, fol. 89.

⁸ See Greven, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-48, for a discussion of Andover ranking. See also Lockridge, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11, for the social considerations involved.

⁹ *Early Records, op. cit.*, vol. 4, March 1661; *ibid.*, February 1667/8; *ibid.*, February 1664/5; *ibid.*, vol. 5, February 1672/3; *ibid.*, December 1677 and January 1679/80.

¹⁰ Will of Edward Richards dated May 1684, Suffolk County Probate, lib. 62, fol. 766.

¹¹ Lockridge, *op. cit.*, p. 95, notes that Medfield (incorporated in 1651) and Wrentham (inc. 1673) served as "buffer settlements between [Dedham] and the Indian-infested wilderness."

¹² *Early Records, op. cit.*, vol. 5, November 1675; *ibid.*, December 1678.

¹³ Nathaniel Richards, Sr., to Edward Richards, witnessed 6 March 1722/3, recorded 10 March 1726, Suffolk County Deeds, lib. 40, fol. 268.

¹⁴ Morse, *op. cit.*, n. p. Morse had town and church records available to him which have since been destroyed.

¹⁵ Lockridge, *op. cit.*, discusses the complex issues involved in Chapter 5.

¹⁶ Gross, *op. cit.*, p. 214. Gross estimates a "minimum of twenty-four to twenty-eight acres was needed for a family of six," and explains his calculations in an accompanying footnote.

¹⁷ No documentation exists for the means by which Josiah increased his holdings. It may be that deeds of sale were never registered with the land court. The inventory of land owned at his death suggests a good deal more than his inherited property, however.

¹⁸ Edward Richards, 9 December 1772 (sic.), Suffolk County Probate, lib. 71, fol. 149; Josiah Richards, 15 November 1771, Suffolk County Probate, lib. 71, fol. 70.