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THE DISTRIBUTION OF LAND IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY WOODBIDGE, NEW JERSEY

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IN October, 1664, John Bayly, Daniel Denton, and Luke Watson purchased from the local Indians the tract of land which would become Woodbridge, New Jersey. Bayly and Denton subsequently made over their rights in the purchase to Captain Philip Carteret, the governor of the colony, and to John Ogden. The first settlers came to this area in the summer of 1665, after Philip Carteret, acting on his commission from the proprietors Sir George Carteret and Lord Berkeley, published word of "advantageous terms offered to land-holders."

In December, 1666, Ogden, Watson, and Philip Carteret, all of Elizabethtown, entered into an agreement with Daniel Peirce of Newbury, Massachusetts, and with his associates for the transfer of the Woodbridge lands. In addition to Peirce, there were five men from Newbury; one came from Haverhill; one from Yarmouth; and one from Barnstable.¹ Carteret and his partners received £80 sterling in the transaction; and 1,000 acres of upland and meadow was reserved to the proprietors.²

¹ Besides Peirce, John Pike, John Bishop, Henry Jaques (Jaquish), Joshua Peirce, and Hugh March were from Newbury. Stephen Kent came from Haverhill. Robert Dennis was from Yarmouth; and John Smith was from Barnstable.

² They were quite specific in reserving Amboy Point, the site of present-day Perth Amboy.

The town was ordered laid out in December, 1667; and the order was probably in execution during the following year. By May, 1668, eight new signatures had been added to Peirce's agreement. In June, 1669, Woodbridge Township was created and its charter granted. Provisions for majority rule were incorporated into the charter; and liberty of conscience was guaranteed to all settlers. A yearly rent of one half-penny per acre was established. The town was required to admit at least 60 families according to the terms of the charter; but it retained discretion to admit or to exclude people beyond that number. This town option was formalized in June, 1669, when the freeholders voted that there "Should Be No Inhabitant admitted after the Number of three Score is compleated Without the Especial Order of the town."³ The charter also reserved acreage for the maintenance of the ministry and of a free school. The total grant for the town encompassed some 23,040 acres.

I

The land policies established by the founders of Woodbridge combined permissiveness and restriction. The freeholders enjoyed unusual latitude in selecting their lands; but they took great pains to control their own numbers.

Initial land-distribution was based on head-count.⁴ Although some of the earliest records have been lost, enough remain to make clear that the head-counts at first included indentured servants as well as members of the family. On June 1, 1669, however, the town meeting ordered that in the future "No Man may Expect to have any Land within the bounds of this Town for their Servants Heads, Nor their Servants to Expect any after the Expiration of their terms of Service."⁵ The exclusion of servants from land in Woodbridge was not adhered to without exception; for in August, immediately following passage of the exclusion ordinance, Thomas Wiatt and Robert Rodgers were both admitted as inhabitants and freeholders of the town, "provided that when [their] time is out [they]

³ Woodbridge Freeholders' Book, Liber A, 1668-1717; meeting of June 1, 1669.

⁴ Joseph Dally, *Woodbridge and Vicinity: The Story of a New Jersey Township* (New Brunswick, N.J.: 1873), evades the question of the initial character of Woodbridge land division and assumes choice by chance or by lot. This assumption is equivocal in the charter but denied by the town records.

⁵ Woodbridge Freeholders' Book, Liber A, 1668-1717; meeting of June 1, 1669.

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stay on in this Town and Improve it as others Do.”⁶ Wiatt would soon leave for Piscataway, the neighboring settlement to the west; but Rodgers remained in Woodbridge and was listed as holding a 90 acre farm in 1682. Far more important, the same ordinance was strictly enforced against the expansion of holdings by wealthy freeholders.

In late November, 1669, the general town meeting voted that “the Nine Purchasers of the Indian Right that have not heads enough according to a Towne order to make their farmes of two hundred forty acres of upland and forty acres of Meadows” should have the land in any case. This was hardly an endorsement of a privileged class with artificial prosperity; for the vote was justified only as “due by Concessions . . . according to their former grants.”⁷ In other words, the people of Woodbridge were merely fulfilling the terms of their bargain with Carteret.

Although the purchasers of the Indian right had sought to preserve a superior position for themselves in town, the people of Woodbridge generally worked to allot land by a vague principle of equality according to need. House-lots, additions of farm plots, upland, and meadow were all apportioned by heads in the initial stage. Each freeholder had his own land, and he had it largely wherever he wanted it. There were no common cultivated fields; and, although some settlers tended to choose house-lots and additions close to one another, there was no definite mandate to do so and, in fact, many freeholders did not.⁸

Considerable variety marked the choices of sites for house-lots and upland. Daniel Peirce held a ten acre house-lot with a ten acre addition adjoining it along the east bank of Papiack Creek. On two sides his land was bounded by the house-lot and addition of Joshua Peirce. Daniel Peirce was formally granted his land in August, 1668.⁹ In June, 1669, it was voted that “George Little Shall have his accomodations of Land Due to him at Rahawack River in that place where he have made Choice of it and also that Small Cove of Meadow Next adjoyning it, and a House Lott

⁶ *Ibid.*, meeting of August 16, 1669.

⁷ *Ibid.*, meeting of November 22, 1669.

⁸ The initial grants would run to an average of some 175 acres per freeholder. Even the less significant holdings ranged in the 90-100 acre region. Thus, the Woodbridge residents held fairly large tracts of land.

⁹ Woodbridge Freeholders' Book, Liber A, 1668-1717; meeting of August 10, 1668.

in part of his accomodations. . . ."¹⁰ Little chose his land almost three miles to the north of the Peirces. The principle of allowing the freeholders to choose their own sites for house-lots and upland was preserved through the seventeenth century, although technical problems gradually jeopardized the execution of that principle.

The free choice, as well as later confused patterns of holding, was possible only because the early settlers of Woodbridge did not create a single town center, no single focal cluster of house-lots to serve as the heart of the community. Instead, house-lots were intermingled with extensive allotments of upland acreage, or were interspersed with additions of smaller farm plots. Thus, for example, John Bishop, Sr. held a house-lot and addition of 39 acres on the east side of Papiack Creek, one of the more heavily settled areas; but his upland of some 360 acres was about two miles to the north along the Rahawack (Rahway) River. Another of the early settlers, John Trueman, held a house-lot on the Rahway River just to the west of Bishop's upland river frontage. Bishop's son, John, Jr., acquired a ten-acre house-lot from the town just west of Trueman's property, with an addition of equal size. George Little, already mentioned, held a house-lot, meadow, and upland on the Rahway River. Thus, along this stream, there was a considerable complexity of types of land-holding. Some, like George Little, had all their lands in this area. Others, like John Bishop, Sr., held only upland there, with house-lots and additions across the township; and still others held only house-lots and additions by the river, with upland plow acreage farther inland, as in the case of John Trueman.

Even the general area of Papiack Creek, which by the standards of seventeenth-century Woodbridge was rather heavily settled, could hardly be regarded as congested, although it was among the town's more systematically developed areas. By January, 1668, it was necessary to order the search for addition land on Papiack Neck. The town meeting empowered Robert Dennis and Joshua Peirce to view all "and any parcels of land that any of the Inhabitants have a desire to have as an addition to their House Lotts on the East side of Papiack Creek or River. . . ."¹¹ Daniel Peirce, who was granted addition land of ten acres in August, 1668, had previously

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, meeting of June 1, 1669.

¹¹ Woodbridge Freeholders' Book, Liber A, 1668-1717; meeting of January 1, 1668.

taken only a ten acre house-lot; but he was able to claim the adjacent property.¹² Joshua Peirce, on the other hand, was already unable to gain land contiguous with his own house-lot.

A similar problem prevailed just above Papiack Neck in the area of Strawberry (Strawberry) Hill, the sheep-grazing common. On the west side of Strawberry Hill, ranged on a north-south axis, were house-lots and additions for Obediah Ayres, John Addams, Benjamin Parkis, Ephraim Andreus, and Israel Thornton. The size of these house-lots with additions initially came to only 15 acres each; but a five acre addition was granted for each plot from the common land on Strawberry Hill in the town meeting of February 1, 1668:9. The close placement of house-lots and additions, totalling about 20 acres per freeholder, along the sheep common meant that the upland acreage of these freeholders would not be contiguous with their other properties, because an access road cut them off from the open lands to the west. Thus, John Addams, for example, held 60 acres of upland along a creek running into the Raritan, a considerable distance from his house-lot.¹³

In July, 1669, the town voted to create a committee chosen "to take a View of the Upland and Meadow Belonging to this Town and so to Consider of it (as they May By Report give Satisfaction) What parts and proportions of Land Ly's most Convenient for accomodating the Inhabitants in their Several Divisions."¹⁴ The charge to this committee seems to have been more broad and general than that given to Robert Dennis and Joshua Peirce a year and a half earlier. Dennis and Peirce seem to have been serving an essentially *ad hoc* function, finding an immediate and short-run solution to the requirements of the freeholders on Papiack Neck. Similarly, the special provision of February, 1668:9 was a short-term solution to the needs of the freeholders with land along the sheep common. Now, however, the new committee was empowered to prepare a general study of the town's lands to be ready generally for the long-term requirements of subdivision.

Even at this early date, the free choice allowed the freeholders in locating their lands was not without its complications. The emphasis on freedom of choice was creating a complex legal geography

¹² *Ibid.*, meeting of February 1, 1668:9.

¹³ Woodbridge Freeholders' Book, Liber A, 1668-1717; meeting of August 18, 1669.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, meeting of July 6, 1669.

within five years after the earliest settlement of the area. Emphasis on convenience to the freeholders, embodied in that concept of free choice, tended to produce the reverse. Thus, by 1669, some efforts were made to control settlement. In February, 1669:70, a section of Papiack Neck which had yet to be claimed was set aside as permanent pastureage for the freeholders who lived on the neck,¹⁵ a concession to their distance from Strawberry Hill. Similarly, when the additions had been granted to the house-lots west of Strawberry Hill in February, 1668:9, the balance of the sheep common was strictly reserved to the use of the town in common. At this time, no other areas were as densely settled as Papiack Neck and the Strawberry Hill region; and no other area had commons so strictly protected.

One serious effort was made, however, to impose general controls in the location of properties. A general town meeting of October, 1669 voted that "there Should Be no Large Accomodations which men are to take up according to the Rule of the Concessions Laid Out within a Mile of the Body of the Towne, that is to say a Mile or thereabouts from the Brook on the North side of the Meeting House or Kirk Green, a mile or thereabouts from Stephen Kent Senr his now dwelling house and a mile from Straberry Hill or the Sheep Common."¹⁶ And in February, 1671:2, "it was unanimously agreed upon and Voted that all the Lands in Common after all former grants are made good, within two miles of any House Lott Shall Not Be Impropriated Nor given to any person without the Consent of Every freeholder that is present at the meeting when any proposition is made for any of the said land in Common."¹⁷ With these two measures fully enforced, Woodbridge would have experienced a total freeze in distribution of land. House-lots had been scattered so widely over the range of Woodbridge territory that all land was within two miles of at least one house-lot. In the

¹⁵ Woodbridge Freeholders' Book, Liber A, 1668-1717; meeting of February 1, 1669:70.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, meeting of October 9, 1669.

¹⁷ Woodbridge Freeholders' Book, Liber A, 1668-1717; meeting of February 6, 1671:2. If this measure was intended specifically to preserve unused common land for the future benefit of nearby freeholders, it is completely impossible to support this from the records. Moreover, it is not especially appealing logic in that a great many freeholders already had widely scattered holdings; and thus the emphasis on consolidation would have been blunted.

ordinance of 1669, the description of the "Body of the Towne" seems to have been extremely broad, probably encompassing several square miles and thus leaving little more than a fringe area open to possible settlement. Moreover, it must be recalled, much of that fringe area, as, for example, along the Rahway River, had already been occupied by 1669. In some respects, it would appear, the later ordinance modified the rather categorical limits of the earlier one. By including the significant escape clause, "after all former grants are made good," the Woodbridge freeholders retained for those settlers already present as much flexibility as ever in the choice of their properties; but they imposed restrictions on any people who might arrive after 1671:2.

These regulations were passed when Woodbridge had grown in less than five years to include some 68 freeholders and their households. Of its 23,040 acres, well over 12,000 had already been allotted. Land had been apportioned with abandon, although much of it was clearly not under cultivation for decades after the date of grant.¹⁸ The measures were passed when, in any real sense, there was no pressure against the land supply and when surplus was the settler's personal experience.¹⁹

Even before 1670, the freeholders began to reject requests for membership in the town of Woodbridge. Outsiders' names appear in brief reports of rejection by the general meeting; but more familiar family names appear as well. John Pike, Jr., for example, son of one of the town's founders, was barred from freehold for years.²⁰ The easiest and most profitable way of becoming a freeholder was to gain someone else's right in the town. This could be done by purchase or by inheritance; and both methods were used during the town's first years. In either case, the general meeting of freeholders retained a right of final sanction; but there is no recorded instance of the meeting overturning a claim by right of inheritance or by purchase. Thus, it would appear, a greater urgency obtained to control numbers than identity among freeholders.

¹⁸ Entries in the Freeholders' Book even into the 1680's indicate that many of the grants, including those under 175 acres had yet to be fully laid out.

¹⁹ It is interesting to question whether the large grants relate to the probable change in land distribution concepts in Haverhill or Andover in the 1650's.

²⁰ John Pike, Jr.'s eventual admission to freehold waited on the invention of a new formula: town membership without any rights to lay claim to land from the common land of the town.

II

The first division of land, aside from the considerable first portions, did not occur until 1686. In preparing to divide from the common lands, the town voted to take a survey of all properties which had been granted until that time. This survey, compiled in 1682, provides a general picture of Woodbridge after less than a generation from its founding. The settlers who had been specially favored for their purchase of the Indian rights to Woodbridge remained the largest landholders. The millwright, John Smith, held 511½ acres, more than any other Woodbridge resident. John Bishop, Sr. owned 470 acres; and Daniel Peirce had 456 acres. Only eleven men held more than 275 acres. Eight had between 175 and 275 acres. The largest group, 44 men, held between 75 and 175 acres each; and only one man had fewer than 75 acres. This was John French, the brick-maker, whose grant of 15 acres from the town frankly assumed his trade would give him need for no more land than that. In addition, the proprietors retained their 1,000 acres allocated at Amboy Point (Perth Amboy); and 200 acres remained set aside for the support of the ministry and 100 for a school. As of 1682, 10,676 acres of public land remained undivided.

As has been noted above, the overwhelming number of freeholders possessed moderately, but not extremely, large sections of upland. The prospects for these freeholders with significantly larger parcels of upland were somewhat equivocal. While the moderate land-holders developed their tracts gradually, there seems to have been some pressure from the town on the larger land-holders to divide their property. Thus, as early as May, 1683, the town explicitly barred Jonathan Dennis from claim to land from the town when admitting him to membership, on the grounds that he would have enough land from his father, Robert Dennis. Jonathan was granted only rights to the commons.²¹ Meanwhile, additional small parcels were being placed under "perpetual commonage."²² These measures, characteristic of the ordinances of the 1680's, tended to reduce the special advantage which the nine settlers of the Indian purchase had gained in the late 1660's. These were measures which

²¹ Woodbridge Freeholders' Book, Liber A, 1668-1717; meeting of May 1, 1683.

²² *Ibid.*, meeting of March 2, 1684:5.

tended to equalize the effective position of the freeholders. The possession of large acreage, 448 acres in the case of Robert Dennis, began to bar one's sons from claim to town lands, while the sons of less wealthy men more often received a favorable nod from the freeholders. The small areas of "perpetual commonage," moreover, which were usually grazing and pasture meadows, were of greater use to the freeholders with less property whose meadow portions were normally rather small.

A significant step toward equalization of the positions of the freeholders came with the 1686 division. For here the town meeting determined to give an equal share to all freeholders from the commons. The head-count proportions were dropped. No importance was attached to the size of present holdings, nor to house-lot sizes.²³ As much as possible the land was to come from the west section of the tract and be divided into approximately equal sections, larger or smaller according to the quality of soil and the terrain.

It should be noted that the division of 1686 does not seem to have been significantly a response to the pressures of the townspeople on the land. In 25 cases of freeholders having fewer than 175 acres,²⁴ the families had just over an average of 2 sons each in 1682, at an average of only $7\frac{1}{2}$ years. Obviously, the sons of freeholders were not yet ready to take up land in large numbers. In this sense, then, the division of 1686 does not appear to have been a function of population increase.

The decision to distribute the land of this division by lots or chance marked an acknowledgment of the town's failure to create a convenient land-system based on choice. Random assignment of properties, which could make real sense only in a very small community or in an open field system of communal farming, suggested that meaningful free choices in land-location were now limited or no longer available. Without a complete property-map of Woodbridge in the late seventeenth century, it is not possible to argue conclusively that the permissive approach which had permitted a

²³ Unlike Andover, for example, Woodbridge never used house-lot sizes or wealth as such as a standard for determining new divisions of land and differentials in amounts of land allotted.

²⁴ These 25 cases were chosen according to the probable thoroughness of family listings in the available records for the period under study. The freeholders having more than 175 acres had only a slightly higher number of sons—approximately 2.5 per family.

radical dispersal of house-lots and upland from the very beginning was in fact the cause of this adjustment in distribution practices. For, although that dispersal had precluded the unobstructed development of geometrically regular tracts, it also meant that even into the 1680's some lands would surely be more convenient to each freeholder's house-lot or upland than others. Some freeholders, however, according to this system, would have been advantaged more than others. The settlers on Papiack Neck or along Strawberry Hill, for example, could not have been remotely optimistic about gaining land adjacent to their upland, since many had already chosen tracts along the more heavily developed Raritan River area. Thus, while the lot or chance system was unsatisfactory, it was unsatisfactory for everyone rather than just for some.

The 1686 division was clearly of greater proportional impact on the estates of the lesser freeholders, amounting in a great many cases to an increase of 50 percent or more in the size of lands held. Conversely, an additional 60 acres meant relatively little to the greater freeholders, such as John Smith, whose 511½ acres prior to the division was raised little more than 10 percent. But neither among the large nor among the small landholders was there an unseemly race to lay hold of the new acreage. The division had secured their rights to the new land; and some freeholders immediately had their land laid out and occupied it. But, for most, there was a considerable lag between claiming and actually using the new property. Instead, there was a sharp increase in efforts to consolidate private holdings. The town records are filled with notices of land trades and of sales of whole tracts or parts of tracts. Exchanges of property were most popular; and there had been precedent for this procedure ever since the beginning of the town's history.

Rights to more than 3,600 acres had been ceded in the division of 1686. But no sooner had the division been completed than agitation began for a new division. By 1691, Daniel Robinds had formally proposed to the general town meeting that a new distribution of land from the common holdings be effected. There was clearly no specific urgency to Robinds' proposal, since a definite decision to organize for future division did not come until March, 1700:1.²⁵ The division did not actually take place until October, 1706. The

²⁵ Woodbridge Freeholders' Book, Liber A, 1668-1717; meeting of March 10, 1700:1.

fifteen year lag between the suggestion and the execution of the new division hardly seems to argue a desperate need among the freeholders; and, in terms of the extent of their holdings, it is unlikely that they required significantly more land either in 1691 or in 1706.

But at about the same time as Robinds raised his proposal, other measures were brought before the town meeting dealing, ultimately, with the material security of the freeholders. First, in February, 1692, Woodbridge embarked on a major effort to exclude the poor from the town. The records of the 1680's and 1690's are filled with notices of civic improvements delayed or cancelled to meet the cost of poor relief. Only rarely is it clear that someone receiving aid is a permanent resident. The 1692 ordinance, then, was aimed directly at the transient poor. It required examination by a select committee of all applicants for admission into the town bounds. More important, however, this same committee was to screen applicants for freehold. At their discretion, those who came "Under a pretence of Settleing" but who were likely to be of expense to the town were to be strenuously advised to leave Woodbridge. If they did not leave voluntarily, the town noted, the law could be used to expel all undesirables, since this right had been reserved to them in their charter.²⁶

Three years later, a further effort to control membership in the town was made. In March, 1695, the general town meeting rescinded its regulation of 1671:2 requiring unanimous consent to the division of land held in common and substituted a regulation that such divisions could be approved by a simple majority.²⁷ It is most unlikely that this was a liberalization of attitude among Woodbridge freeholders. At the same meeting, the rights of freeholders admitted as of 1695 were sharply curtailed. The liberty of grazing and feeding in the commons was reserved to those admitted before that year, as was that of collecting fire wood and timber. Free land was now out of the question.²⁸ Thus, the meeting of March, 1695 is more important for restrictions than for loosening of ordinances.

²⁶ Woodbridge Freeholders' Book, Liber A, 1668-1717; meeting of February 2, 1692.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, meeting of March 25, 1695.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, as of 1695 admission to freehold would require the payment of 20 shillings for the town's use. Land granted out of the common holdings would require the payment of 12 pence per acre at the time of delivery (in effect, retroactive rent to about the time of founding), and payment of a share of future rent.

Even the shift from unanimous to majority consent on the division of commons may represent an effort to prevent land from passing out of the circle of freeholders already sharing in Woodbridge lands.

The swiftness of the call for a new division of land after the 1686 division suggests some eagerness to dispose of the town lands without reference to immediate agricultural needs. Such an interpretation becomes more plausible in light of the divisions of the 1700's. The second major division of land occurred in October, 1706. In October, 1705, a committee had been appointed to prepare for the distribution, working on essentially the same set of rules as in 1686.²⁹ Again the process of selection of properties by drawing lots was to be followed. At least 34 of the original freeholders had either sold or bequeathed their rights to the commons. Rather ironically, Daniel Robinds, who had proposed the new division, had died years earlier.

The 1706 division gave 60 acres of land to each freeholder, and it was to all intents a recreation of the distribution of 1686. Again, well over 3,600 acres was granted, as had been the case in the earlier division. The effect of these two moves was to reduce the total acreage remaining to the town in common to about 3,000 acres. However, as soon as the 1706 division was completed and before the lands were actually occupied in any significant numbers, proposals for still another division were made; and in July, 1707, the notion was accepted.³⁰ A committee was empowered to reserve certain areas of meadow in common. These areas of commonage included such established tracts as Strawberry Hill and Papiack Meadows as well as new commons, among the division lots along the Rahway River and among the more recently divided tracts to the west toward Piscataway. The grant in 1707 was initially to be 20 acres to each freeholder; but, in executing the order, the committee distributed 22½.

After the division of 1707, the town retained between 1,500 and 2,000 acres of land in common. Most of this was taken up by the freeholders in subsequent divisions in 1715, 1717, 1720, and 1721.³¹ The availability of land had clearly become limited by 1720 when

²⁹ Woodbridge Freeholders' Book, Liber A, 1668-1717; meeting of October 24, 1705.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, meeting of July 12, 1707. It appears that the town had acreage perhaps 400 or so over the 3,000 figure, the inexactitude being accounted for by the adjustments made in the sizes of grants according to soil quality and terrain.

³¹ See Woodbridge Freeholders' Book, Liber B, 1716-1799.

the grant was below one acre per freeholder; and in 1721 apportionment of land according to size was abandoned in favor of apportionment according to approximately equal money-value parcels. The startling frequency of these subdivisions suggests a direct interest in liquidating the public property. Not only were there six divisions of land in fifteen years, but four in the last six years. Moreover, the result of the last burst of division was to leave the town of Woodbridge with virtually no land in common except for the strictly reserved grazing meadows.

SPECULATIVE NOTE

This article has been limited to a description of the land distribution in Woodbridge during its early years; it is more a discussion of process than of motive. But a few words about motive—marked for warning as the speculation of an insider—may prove helpful in isolating areas for future research.

First, the townspeople of Woodbridge were for the most part immigrants from Massachusetts. All had experience there with attempts to regulate settlement and land-holding; and, from recent studies, it appears that these attempts had been failures. In Woodbridge, the settlers made no effort to force the creation of a nucleus of house-lots. Did the Woodbridge freeholders resolve to avoid the mistakes they themselves had lived with in Massachusetts? Would some close study of genealogical sources reveal a commitment to free choice and personal preference in locating and using lands? And, in the hope of creating a loose and convenient system, did the freeholders create a property maze which rapidly became so complex as to defy town-meeting efforts to control it?

Second, the political affairs of New Jersey were highly unstable in the colonial period. In addition, the division of the colony into two jurisdictions, East and West, had encouraged land-disputes from the seventeenth century to the time of the Revolution. Did the land disputes impress the freeholders with the need to vest claims in private citizens rather than leave land in the public domain? More important, what was the effect of the consolidation of the Jerseys into a single colony from 1702 and the cancellation of proprietary status? Did the freeholders fear a royal claim on all undistributed lands?

Third, the records indicate that poor people, including especially

transients, were a growing source of complaint and concern among the people of Woodbridge. The effect of many of the ordinances was to restrict access of outsiders to town membership and a share in its holdings. In addition, such laws as the ordinance of September 22, 1692, which allowed non-freeholders to cultivate as much as six acres of land for no more than six years, emphasized that, although these labors might make the public land more worthwhile for division among the freeholders, mere presence in the town and even an improvement of its resources were no claim to membership.³² Exactly how bad, then, was the problem of the poor in Woodbridge, and how numerous were the transients? Can we pass beyond the description of the effect of the ordinances and beyond the notation of a curious coincidence in timing of land laws, divisions, and limitations imposed on outsiders and on the poor?

Fourth, while the effect of land laws in Woodbridge was to restrict those not already admitted, it also was to equalize conditions among those who had. Seen in this way, Woodbridge in the seventeenth century was characterized by two very different, but ultimately complementary streams. It was a society of equal freeholders, with equal rights in government according to the town charter, who worked impressively to make their town more economically equal among themselves. But it was also a society of the status quo, armed with the rights of exclusion of newcomers, in which the freeholders could protect themselves as a group from the depreciation of their rights by preventing the increase of their numbers from without. The question is, can such an interpretation be sustained by literary sources other than the Woodbridge town records?

The question of motive eludes conclusive answering if we rest our case on the town records alone; but the material effects of the land distribution do not. The nature of land division in Woodbridge, coupled with specific laws controlling the admission and activities of outsiders, reduced material land-derived class divisions within the closed group of Woodbridge freeholders; but it transformed the freeholders as a whole into a specially privileged class.

³² Woodbridge Freeholders' Book, Liber A, 1668-1717; meeting of September 22, 1692.