

The Post Revolutionary Period

Following the war, use of the commons appeared to be reserved for religious services, burial, and militia training (Figure 6). In 1835, a devastating tornado destroyed the St. James Church steeple, roof, and some walls (Phillips 1944:10). These were eventually rebuilt, and church services soon resumed. One year later, the village was mapped by the United States Coast Survey, which produced the most detailed map of the southern portion of the village to that date (Figure 7). Four years later the northern portion of the village was mapped (Figure 8). The maps clearly depict the High Road, and several homes that fronted the road. The St. James Church stood in the center of the village. The training ground commons was flanked to the east by a dwelling, later owned by J. Hager in 1850 (Figure 9). Further east, near the corner of Meadow Road and the High Road stood the home of H. Wooding. Southeast of the commons was the Dunham estate, the dwelling of which still stands. Stores, homes, and shops fronted the north side of the High Road (see Figure 7). Between 1840 and 1850, a schoolhouse was added to the commons, which stood south of the church (see Figure 9). The home of George Allen was also erected just southwest of the commons, likely near the location of Jill Court. It is probable that this land was once situated within the commons during the late 17th or early 18th century. So too was the land west of the burial ground around what is now Thomasine and Church Streets.

On April 12, 1852, the town specified that the commons was no longer used or needed as parade grounds for the militia (Brush 1964:156-157). It further mentioned that parts of the commons had been enclosed by others from time to time and formed a committee to investigate the issue. One year later, on April 11, 1853, the town resolved that the burial ground in the commons was to be used as a public burial ground (Brush 1964:159). The town also relinquished all right and claims to the common land in the township except what might be required for burial purposes as stated in the original grant. It is possible that during this time, the commons in the center of the village was further reduced in size.

In 1861, the village was again depicted on a county-wide survey map (Figure 10). In addition to showing a clear growth in development in the village, the map indicated that in the decade since 1850, the school had been moved from its previous location south of the church to a new site west of the church within the burial ground. The reason for the relocation is unclear, and the relocation itself is questionable as the schoolhouse was later depicted again south of the church on an 1876 survey map (Figure 11). This

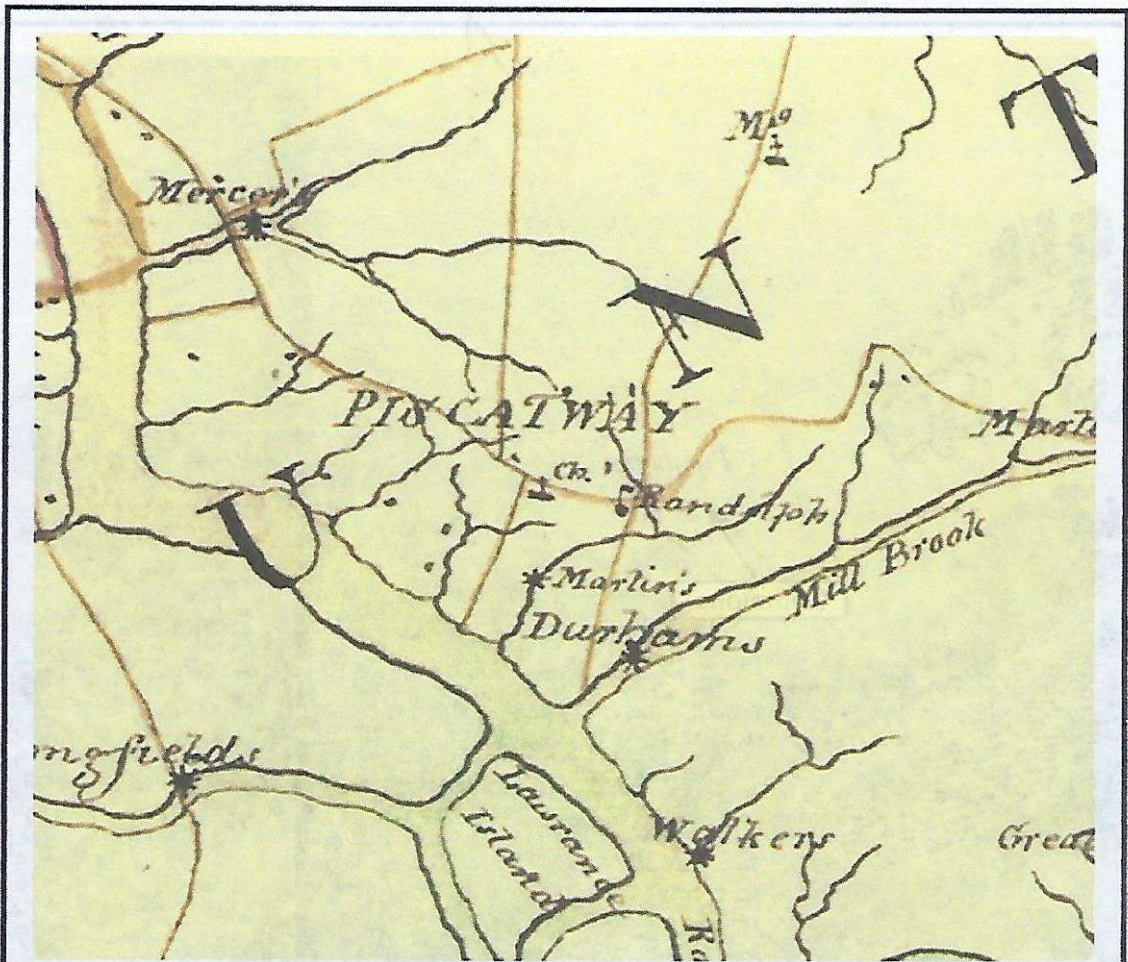


Figure 6: 1778 John Hills, A Map of Part of the Province of New Jersey.



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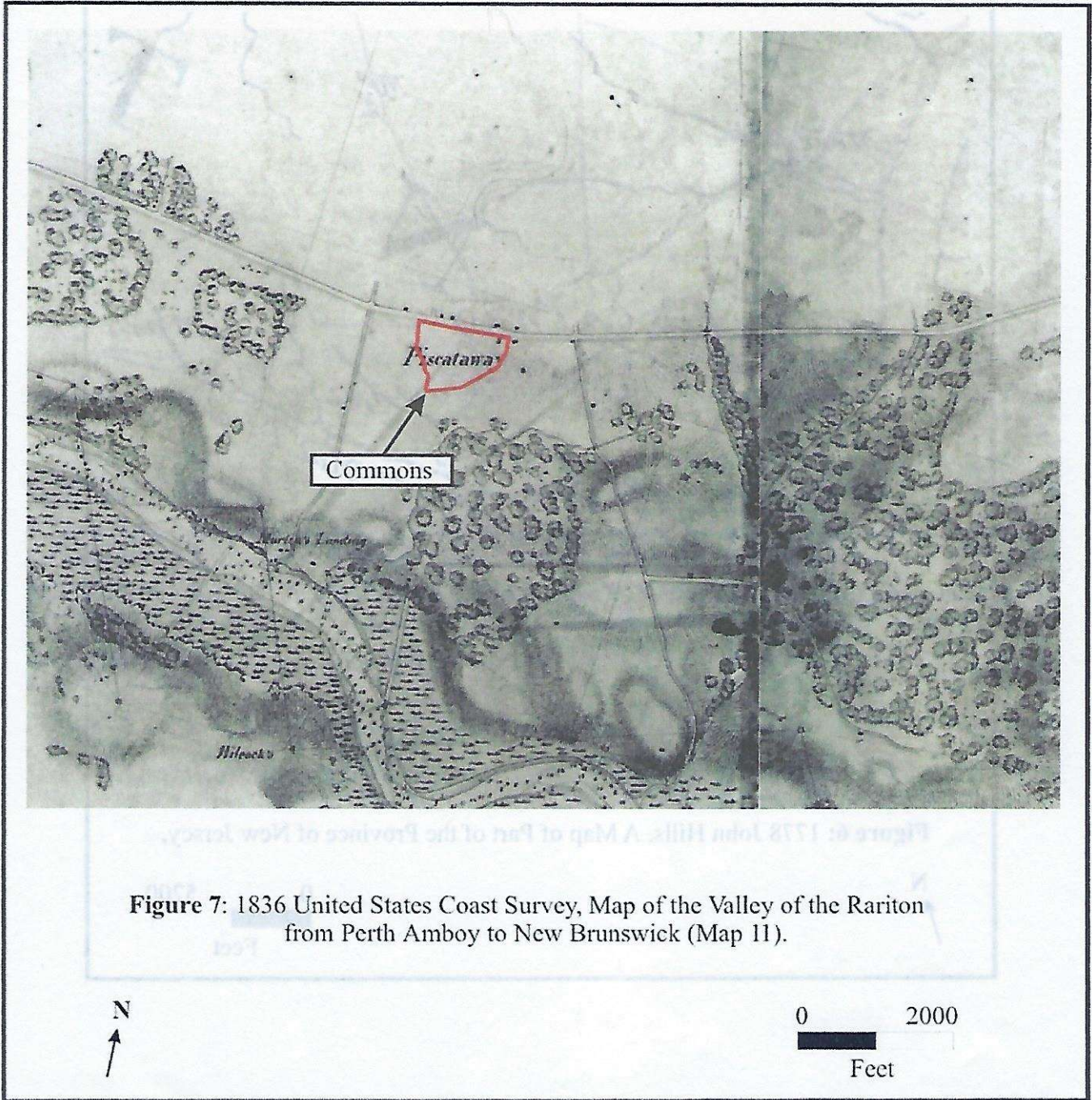
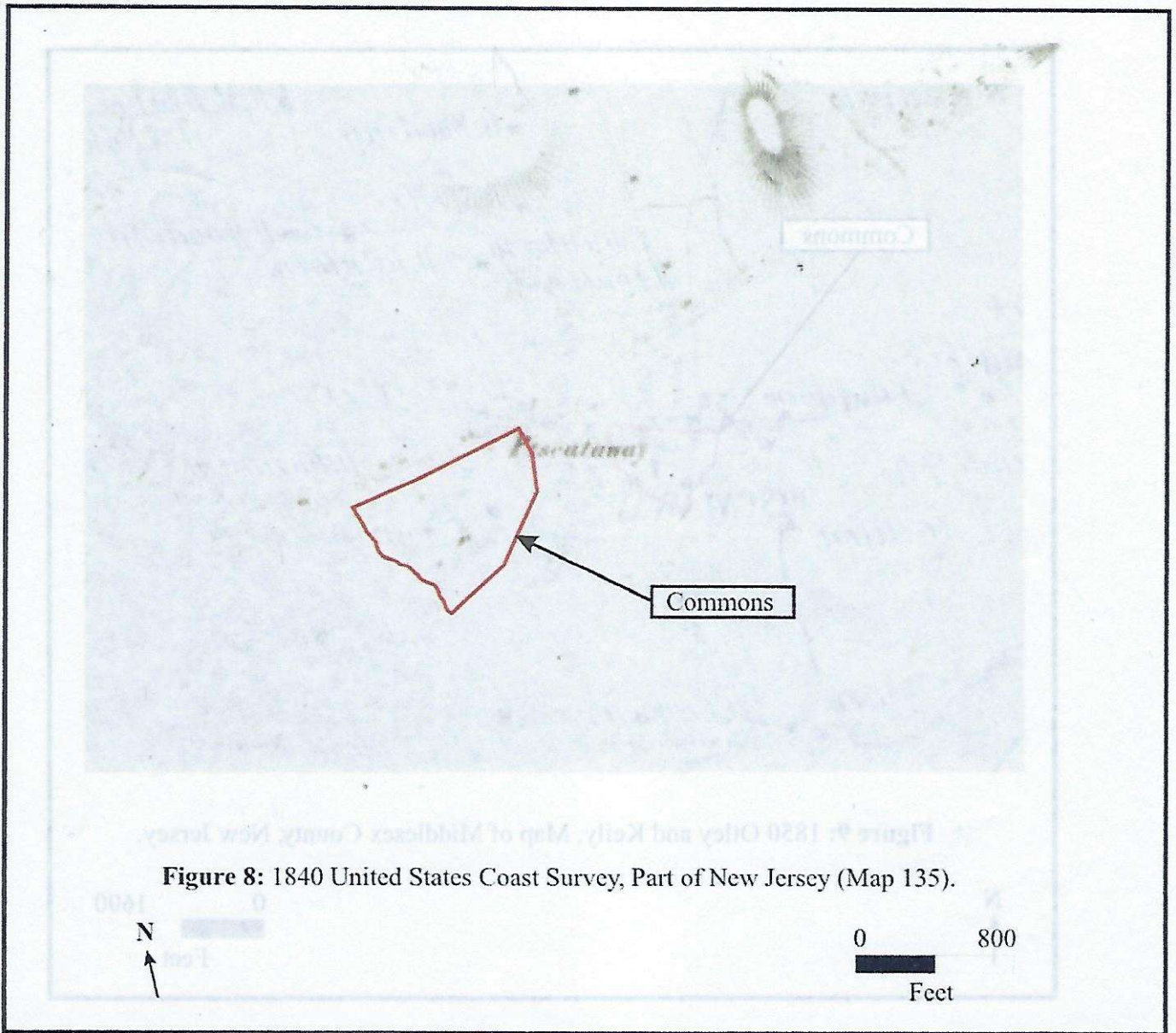


Figure 7: 1836 United States Coast Survey, Map of the Valley of the Rariton from Perth Amboy to New Brunswick (Map 11).



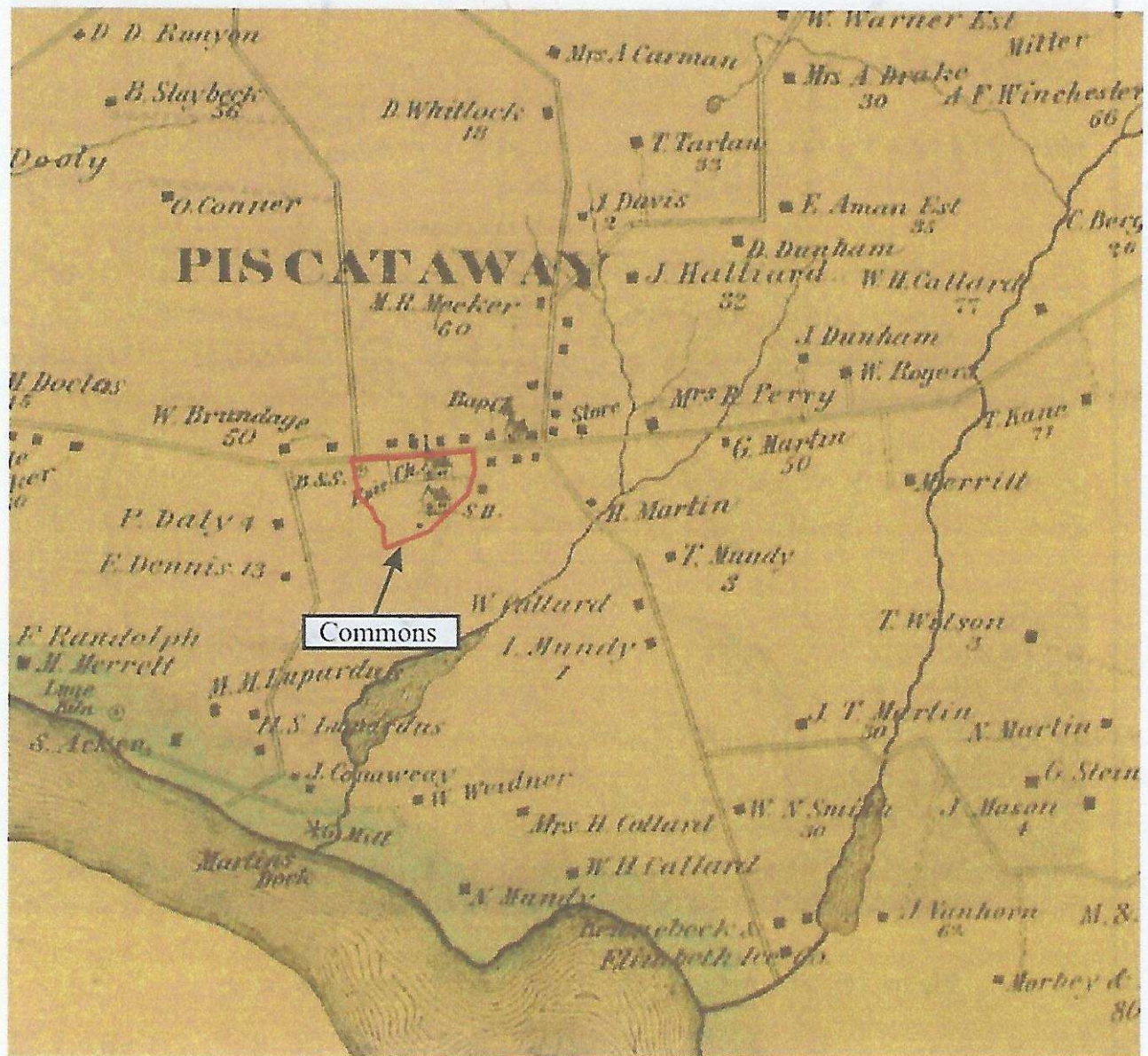
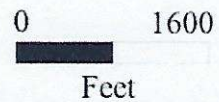


Figure 11: 1876 Everts and Stewart, *Combination Atlas Map of Middlesex County, New Jersey*.



schoolhouse, a one room gable end frame building, with a bell tower and an arched garret vent at its gable end, stood south of the church until being destroyed by fire in the 1980s. It is possible that the schoolhouse may have been used for municipal meetings during the 19th century. In the early 20th century, a large addition was erected on the south side of the church. Later, in 1916, forty-six years after Raritan Township was formed from the southeastern portion of Piscataway, for reasons not clear today, the General Proprietors of the Eastern Division of New Jersey and the Township of Raritan sold a roughly rectangular lot of 0.33 acres, which encompassed the church to the rector, wardens, and vestrymen of St. James Church (Middlesex County Clerk's Office 1916a, 1916b). The lot was bounded to the east and west by the burial ground, and south by the town commons, the latter of which was undeveloped and contained scattered trees. During the 20th century the schoolhouse was converted into a municipal police station and was used in part as a meeting hall. Later in 1986, it was intended for use by the Edison Township Historical Society, but was subsequently destroyed by fire. Today, athletic fields and the Piscataway burial ground characterize the commons, which now surround the St. James Church.

Summary

Examination of historic documents associated with the training ground town commons in the village of Piscataway offered a unique opportunity to shed light upon the 17th-century colonial settlement of Piscataway, its initial town plan, land use within the commons, and the changing needs of the town over time. As presented above, the Proprietary period from 1666 to 1702 witnessed the most complex use of the town commons. Centrally located within the village, surrounded by a grid of rectangular house lots, beyond which spread a sea of large farm and meadow parcels culminating in a town plan that mimicked settlement patterns found in northern New England where many of the initial settlers originated, the commons was the focus of military, religious, judicial, and municipal life in the village. It also served as the final resting place of settlers who called the village home. While documents are sparse, and the particulars of land use brief, it is probable that beyond the St. James Church and burial ground that are still located within the original bounds of the commons, the parcel also housed a magazine, gaol, pound, stocks, and meeting or town house, and was used as a militia training ground. Some of these buildings were likely situated close to Woodbridge Avenue, and at least one foundation, purported to be that of the original town house, was situated within the burial ground. During the Revolutionary War, the commons witnessed a brief occupation by the British

army and a military engagement between British and American forces. Such activities may survive archaeologically within the commons. By the late 18th century, the commons was primarily used for religious activities. In the mid-19th century, a schoolhouse was added to the commons behind the church. The former wood frame structure likely also served as a town meeting hall when not used in the capacity of educating the town's young. Later, during the twentieth-century, as the population increased and the town's infrastructure changed, the schoolhouse was converted into a police station, and was subsequently destroyed by fire in the 1980s. As open land was consumed by the voracious appetite of suburban development, and recreation gained value and importance in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, use within the commons was revitalized with the installation of athletic fields that replaced a parcel of scattered trees. The southern portion of the commons remains undeveloped today, and holds the potential to yield information about its prior use, and the colonial history of the village that went poorly recorded in over three centuries of historic documents associated with the commons.

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