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Source: *The New England Quarterly*, Mar., 1955, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Mar., 1955), pp. 51-71

Published by: The New England Quarterly, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/362360>

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LAND SPECULATION AND THE SETTLEMENT OF KENT,

1738-1760

CHARLES S. GRANT

KENT, on the extreme western border of Connecticut, was one of that colony's "notorious" auction townships, sold in fifty-three shares to bidders gathered at Windham, Connecticut, for the "vendue" on March 8, 1738.¹ The settling of Kent and its sister towns by 1740 was a final step in the filling up of Connecticut's frontier.²

Recent historians have been interested in the unwholesome aspects of the eighteenth-century New England frontier: the orgy of speculation in the new towns, the evils of absenteeism, the conflicts of proprietors versus non-proprietors,³ and the exploitation of debtor-pioneer farmers by wealthy easterners.

¹ Kent Land Records, Proprietors, 1-5. Three of the fifty-three shares were reserved for school, church, and support of a minister. Purchasers of the fifty shares were awarded title not to specific parcels of land but rather to one fifty-third part of all acreage in the township. They obtained title to specific plots by getting together and dividing blocks of land among themselves. They made such divisions ten times between 1738 and 1776, hence the references to first division, second division, et cetera. Each division was surveyed into rectangular lots numbered one through fifty-three. Numbers were drawn lottery-style from a covered box. Thus Daniel Comstock, who bought an original proprietary share at Windham, drew lot 17 in the first division, lot 23 in the second, lot 49 in the third, and pitch five in the fourth. (A pitch was not surveyed in advance but was selected by the drawee in his proper turn. If there was a particular piece of land he wanted in the area designated for "pitching," he marked off fair boundaries for himself.)

² Dorothy Deming, "The Settlement of Litchfield County," *Connecticut Tercentenary Commission of Historical Publications* (New Haven, 1933). While Kent was being auctioned off at Windham, Goshen was being sold to bidders at New Haven, Canaan at New London, Cornwall at Fairfield, Salisbury at Hartford, Sharon at New Haven, and Norfolk at Hartford. Proceeds from the sales (about 10,000 pounds for Kent) went for support of schools in the auction towns.

³ Kent Land Records, Proprietors. All those who owned rights, or shares of the common, undivided lands and who thus acquired title to lots and pitches through successive divisions were called proprietors or commoners. Those persons who did not own shares, and were not the grantees of the entire town, but obtained title by direct purchase from proprietors, were called non-proprietors or non-commoners.

Kent was a frontier town,⁴ inflicting severe hardships⁵ on a group of Congregational pioneers, who cleared land, erected rough cabins, and lived the subsistence-farming kind of life typical of the New England frontier of the period. But Kent was an exception to the standard picture. The purpose of this essay is twofold: first, to develop the story of speculation in local lands so that Kent, as a representative of prosperous, harmonious towns, can be placed on the scales as a counter balance for communities steeped in controversy and rancor; second, to suggest that the investigation of more towns along the lines followed here may establish that there was generally less clashing between absentee speculators and local residents than standard accounts would imply.

One of the darkest pictures of the eighteenth-century frontier is that of Curtis Nettels in his *Roots of American Civilization*.

The frontier farmers viewed the speculators as their natural enemies who withheld land from cultivation, waged war against squatters, forced the price of land upwards, controlled town governments as absentee voters, and failed to contribute toward the defense and welfare of the new communities . . . The most important legacy of speculation was this sharpened antagonism between seaboard wealth and frontier poverty.⁶

Almost as gloomy are James Truslow Adams, Louis M. Hacker, Oliver P. Chitwood, and other writers of general surveys.⁷

⁴ Connecticut Archives, Colonial Wars, iv, 136. A petition of Abel Wright of Kent complains of Kent's exposed frontier position and its danger in case of war with France. He wants ammunition at public expense.

⁵ Edward C. Starr, *A History of Cornwall* (New York, 1926). Cornwall was Kent's sister town and immediate neighbor to the north. Mr. Starr has used memoirs of Cornwall's first minister as the basis for accounts of incredible hardships during the severe winter of 1740. Kent and all the auction towns petitioned for relief at this time. Connecticut Archives, Towns and Lands, vii, 203.

⁶ Curtis Nettels, *Roots of American Civilization* (New York, 1940), 529. Nettels included Connecticut in his indictment of speculation and mentioned the Connecticut township auctions of 1738 where towns were granted "... to speculative promoters instead of to bona fide settlers."

⁷ James Truslow Adams, *Provincial Society, 1690-1763* (New York, 1927), 247-249. "But in case after case . . . a large number, often a majority, and occasional-

They have distinguished predecessors in Lois K. Mathews⁸ and Frederick Jackson Turner, who studied “restless democracy, resentfulness over taxation and control, recriminations between the western pioneer and the eastern capitalist.”⁹ Probably the outstanding monograph on problems of New England’s eighteenth-century frontier is Roy H. Akagi, *The Town Proprietors of the New England Colonies*.¹⁰ Part II of his study is entirely devoted to land speculation and the attendant evils. His work is a documentation of the earlier Turner assumptions and is often cited.

These historians responsible for the standard “gloomy” line have possibly tended to seek out bitterness and controversy. Certainly Turner was looking for patterns of antagonism found later in Shays’ Rebellion and the Populist Revolt. Seeking controversy or not, most writers have used sources that emphasize sore spots on the New England scene.¹¹ In particular,

ly the entire body of grantees remained behind in the comfortable old towns . . . [thus the pioneer’s attitude] would become one of extreme resentment against these capitalists . . .” See also Louis M. Hacker, *The Triumph of American Capitalism* (New York, 1940), 108. “In the frontier western and northern sections of New England, the establishment of a freehold met with equal difficulties . . . the monopoly [of land] by town proprietors, or absentee landlords and speculators, was at the basis of the discontent of the lower middle classes.” See also Oliver Perry Chitwood, *A History of Colonial America* (New York, 1948), 445. “. . . the old practice of granting lands to a group of prospective settlers had given way to that of selling whole townships to land speculators, who sold it again in small tracts to actual settlers . . . the pioneers living in the villages felt that they were being exploited by wealthy capitalists.”

⁸ Lois K. Mathews, *The Expansion of New England* (Boston, 1909), 99. Miss Mathews used Massachusetts for most of her examples but indicated that Connecticut settlements were similar. She mentioned the Connecticut auctions of 1738 when Kent was sold.

⁹ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York, 1920), 53. Turner soft-pedaled Connecticut settlements though he did note, “The Connecticut River towns pressed steadily up that stream, along its tributaries into the Housatonic valleys.” Kent and the 1738 auction townships are on the middle and upper reaches of the Housatonic.

¹⁰ Roy H. Akagi, *The Town Proprietors of the New England Colonies* (Philadelphia, 1924), 197. Akagi credited Connecticut with full participation in the speculative mania. Of the auction townships, including Kent, he wrote, “In these auctions, the spirit of speculation reaches its height.”

¹¹ Historians have relied heavily on town papers collected in central archives. The local documents most likely to reach the archival deposits were the grievance

they have relied on the more striking town histories such as that of Westminster.¹² Adams wrote, “. . . we have let down our lines here and there to take soundings.” Hovering over 1,000 New England towns, the historians dropped their lines and nearly all hit Westminster. Kent, and perhaps scores of towns like it, presented a scene poles apart from Westminster. But lacking spectacular events, lacking adequate local histories, Kent-type towns have been ignored. Their stories, too, deserve attention before a final verdict is recorded.

* * *

Kent emphatically bears out the standard contention on the prevalence of speculation. The most conspicuous economic fact which emerges from an analysis of Kent Land Records is that nearly all Kent land figured in speculative transactions. The figures are surprisingly large considering the small size of Kent (about 200 families in 1760).¹³ During the period 1738-1760 a total of 872 different men bought and sold Kent land.¹⁴ James Lassell of Windham engaged in thirty-nine separate transactions during this period. The famous William Samuel Johnson of Stratford did not start until 1755 but between that year and 1792 he figured in one hundred separately recorded Kent land deals. Altogether, there were over 6,000 land transactions

petitions forwarded to the higher authority of the general assemblies in the provincial capitals. From here they drifted to storage attics and thence to state archives. These petitions paint a bleak picture but also one that is often exaggerated.

¹² W. S. Heywood, *History of Westminster* (Lowell, 1893). This work is a frequently cited local history.

¹³ Franklin Bowditch Dexter (ed.), *Extracts from the Itineraries and other Miscellanies of Ezra Stiles* (New Haven, 1916), 29. Mr. Viet's estimate of two hundred families for Kent in 1761 is termed by Stiles "a rude guess." Kent's own census in 1769 bears out this figure. At this time there was a total population of over 1,200 including women and children. There were 253 male heads of families. Kent Land Records, IV, 431.

¹⁴ Tabulated from Kent Land Records. Town clerks recorded practically all official town business in the Land-Record folio volumes. In the series at Kent the earliest volume has no number but is labeled "Proprietors." Thenceforth volumes are numbered consecutively. The major part of each volume is devoted to land sales. These always indicated the towns where grantee and grantor resided. Four large index volumes list all grantors and grantees separately in alphabetical order.

in this frontier settlement between 1738 and 1760 for an average of better than seven deals per man.

However, Turner, Akagi, Nettels, and others have failed to note the speculative activity of the lower-class, on-the-spot settler. Historians have pictured the frontiersman as too poor to speculate, as belonging to a class antagonistic to that of the rich eastern speculator. At Kent, however, the humblest pioneers were apparently speculating their heads off.

The way these farmers made land deals among themselves is astonishing. The first division¹⁵ naturally contained the best land for farming and home-building. The fifty-three lots of this division lay on both sides of the "twelve-rod highway to Cornwall" now U. S. Route Seven. This choice land came into the hands of the settlers almost immediately¹⁶ but, instead of remaining stable and inactive, the first-division lots were bought and sold more often than any other plots in Kent. For example, lot 46 was drawn by proprietor-settler Thomas Beeman at the first division in Windham in 1738. By 1748 this farm lot had reached Jethro Hatch, but a glance at its gyrations in between Beeman and Hatch is instructive.

Lot 46, First Division
1738—to Thomas Beeman by draw

West part of Lot	East part of Lot
1739—Thomas Beeman to Ebenezer Barnum, Sr. No price.	1739—Thomas Beeman to Nathaniel Robards for 114 pounds.
1743—Ebenezer Barnum Sr. to Jonathan and Samuel Skeels for 100 pounds.	1741—Nathaniel Robards to Ebenezer Barnum, Jr. for 162 pounds.
1743—Jonathan and Samuel Skeels to Ebenezer Barnum, Jr. for 120 pounds.	

¹⁵ Kent Land Records, Proprietors, 2. Also see footnote 1. The first division was voted on March 9, 1738, the day after the auction at Windham. Both absentee speculators and prospective settlers were in a hurry to secure title to the best possible land; and instructions to the surveyors were "to lay out such part of the lands . . . as they shall judge best for the interest of said proprietors."

¹⁶ Tabulated from Kent Land Records, Index, 1; also Land Records, Proprietors, vi.

- 1745—Ebenezer Barnum, Jr. to Amos Barnum for 413 pounds.
- 1745—Amos Barnum to Ephraim Fisher for 512 pounds.
- 1746—Ephraim Fisher to John Beeman (brother of original owner, Thomas). No price.
- 1748—John Beeman to Jethro Hatch. No price.¹⁷

Every man listed above was a local settler. These same settlers, and almost all other settlers in Kent, were dealing in similar fashion with other first-division lots. Lot 6 changed hands seven times, lots 22 and 29 changed ten times each, and lots 36 and 46 changed eight times each. The average turnover for all fifty-three lots during the period 1738-1760 was four, this being reduced by seven lots for which there is no record of any sales. It seems hardly an exaggeration to say that each pioneer wanted a piece of five or six other home lots. Abel Wright owned at various times parts of eleven first-division lots; Nathaniel Berry held in ten, John Mills in seven, Joseph Pratt in six, and Reuben Swift in five. The Barnums collectively were in sixteen of the lots and the Comstocks, Hatches, Hubbells, and Fullers were almost as widespread.

Since all these men were settlers, it might be reasoned that the trading represented an effort to consolidate holdings. However, evidence indicates that only a small percentage of the purchases were for this purpose. One need only establish the home lot of an individual and then look to see where he did his buying. Usually he bought on the other side of town or in some inexplicable, crazy-quilt pattern.¹⁸ The writer has studied

¹⁷ Kent Land Records, III, 261. Usually a price is given but occasionally it is hidden behind the phrase "valuable consideration."

¹⁸ The Comstocks, a rare exception, did concentrate somewhat around lot 27. Daniel, Junior, drew this at Windham and in 1741 he bought lot 26 from Joshua Barnum and lot 25 from Abel Barnum. He bought lot 29 later in 1753 and lot 23 in 1769. The Comstocks made a total of seventy-one scattered purchases so consolidation of holdings provided only a small part of their incentive.

many of these lots which were traded most frequently among the local pioneers to see if some special feature might account for their popularity. In no case was there anything unusual, such as iron-ore land, water-power land, or a good cross-roads site for a tavern. The deed descriptions and present-day inspection show merely good farming lots. One may then conclude that most of these purchases were purely speculative. Here was a steadily growing town with a considerable population turnover. Land was easy to buy, easy to sell, and best of all, prices were steadily rising.¹⁹

Although the Kent records support standard-version writers on the prevalence of land speculation, they produce a far different version as to who the speculators were. Eastern land jobbers, class conflicts, and evils of absenteeism were barely evident. In Kent there was a central group of pioneers who endured hardships, raised tremendous families, and reaped the largest share of speculative profits. There were, of course, a few wealthy absentees and some poverty-stricken locals.²⁰ The full Kent story deserves to be written around the dominant majority of sturdy farmer-speculators rather than in terms of a struggle between insignificant ne'er-do-wells and seaboard aristocrats.

By using land records, church records, tax lists, vital statistics, and lists of town officers, it is possible to determine the name of every person who speculated in Kent land as an absentee and of almost every man who took up residence in the

¹⁹ Price trends tabulated from Kent Land Records. As population increased, the demand tended to raise prices. Also there was a steady monetary inflation in the 1740's. From 1743 to 1745 the town increased the minister's salary seven-teen per cent to compensate him for "the sink of money." Kent Land Records, I, 51.

²⁰ Wealthy absentees included Benjamin Gale, Jared Eliot, William Williams, and William Samuel Johnson. Kent Land Records, Index. Special hardship cases are revealed in petitions to the General Assembly. A committee was appointed to administer relief in 1742. Conn. Archives, Towns and Lands, IX, 141-147. There was the Moses Rowlee eviction case, Towns and Lands, VII, 211. In 1769 Nathan Tibbal's house burned down leaving his wife and five children "much in want." To solicit charity he required permission of the General Assembly. Conn. Archives, Miscellaneous, III, 105.

town.²¹ The minutes of the town meetings and proprietors meetings are especially helpful in affording insight as to character and economic status of different citizens. More important, all sources tend to interweave and produce some sort of sketch for each individual.

The investigator would like to know three things: first, the numerical breakdown between absentees and residents (what percentage of all property owners were absentee?); second, profits gained (who were the active traders and profiteers?); and third, actual acreage owned by the two groups (what percentage of total acreage did absentees hold at any given time?).

Of the 772 persons who owned land in Kent between 1738 and 1760, 474, or sixty-one per cent, took up residence in Kent. Thus sixty-one per cent were prepared to endure frontier hardships, which were extremely severe in 1740 and still moderately rugged by 1760. True, many settlers did not stay more than four or five years but moved on to New York, Pennsylvania, or Vermont. Such movement was characteristic of the time affecting all towns and classes.²² As to the 298 absentees (thirty-nine per cent), were they the notorious land jobbers, the class apart, which Turner, Akagi, and Nettels found settlers viewing with bitter distrust? When one examines this group of 298 absentees, one finds little basis for class distinction. They will be grouped forthwith into relatives, neighbors, combination neighbor-relatives, small investors, and finally large absentee land jobbers.

A well-known phenomenon of the time, illustrated effectively at Kent, was the large family, often with ten or twelve chil-

²¹ Land Records furnish the most names. Church Records in three volumes and Vital Statistics in two volumes are spotty for the early years but give a picture of the size of families and help to form a general idea of the size of the population. Tax lists are scattered through the Land Record volumes with names not in alphabetical order. Names of elected town officials may be screened from minutes of town meetings.

²² Privately printed genealogies appear to have attracted little attention from historians. A striking contribution of such volumes as the *Noyes Gilman Ancestry* (St. Paul, 1907) is the town-hopping record of these ancestors. Starting in 1630, the early settlers exhibited amazing restlessness. The ancestors of Jabez Swift of Kent, for example, moved an average of seven or eight times.

dren. This situation quite possibly exerted a strong influence against class antagonism. After all, a colonial tended to compete in a world populated by his own brothers and cousins, some of whom had risen to the gentry class while the black sheep had dropped to the bottom of the social heap. Yet family loyalty and unity served as a wire network interlacing top, middle, and bottom classes. The frontiersman could hardly be called a class antagonist of the absentee speculator when the latter was his own father, son, or brother! At Kent it would seem that the heart of a family, or clan, would arrive en masse leaving behind a mere scattering of less energetic brothers. Of the Swifts, who came from Sandwich, Massachusetts, it was the vigorous, resourceful, and soon-wealthy Jabez, Nathaniel, and Reuben who left behind their apparently less energetic brothers, Zephania and Jira.²³ With the Hatches of Tolland, the Hubbells of Newtown, and the Barnums of Danbury, it was not the ne'er-do-wells who traipsed off to Kent; rather, it was the heads of the families that led the way. The Barnums, in time to become a leading iron family of New England, helped fill Kent with Amos, David, Ebenezer, Ebenezer Junior, Gidion, Gidion Junior, Jehiel, Joshua, and Richard. Left behind in Danbury were Abel, Epharm, and Nathaniel. Similarly, during the 1738-1760 period there were eight adult Beemans at Kent, ten Fullers, fourteen Rowlees, and over twenty families with four or more adult members in Kent.

Of the 298 absentees, 109 were stay-at-home members of Kent families.²⁴ They represented all levels of the social and financial scale and were connected to Kent through a variety of relationships. But they had one thing in common. They avoid-

²³ *Noyes Gilman Ancestry*, 307-311.

²⁴ Tabulated from Kent Land Records. About half the 109 are certainly family members because the recorded deeds spell out the relationship. "In consideration for the love and affection I bear for my son . . ." Also included are less certain cases where names and towns of origin are the same. Kent proprietor Joseph Hatch of Tolland never came to Kent; proprietor Timothy Hatch of Tolland did. It seems safe to assume the two were related and to count Joseph as a stay-at-home member of a Kent family.

ed the stigma of “callous, absentee, land jobber.” At the top of the scale Jared Eliot, the famous Killingsworth pastor-scientist, owned valuable Kent lands.²⁵ He gave these in 1757 to sons Jared Nathan, Wathernon, and Aaron. All but the last moved immediately to Kent and became prominent in the community. Eliot descendants remained until the 1840’s. Philip Cavarly of Colchester might appear to conform to the standard caricature. However, he gave his lands to daughter Abigail, who was the wife of Josiah Strong of Colchester. By 1756 the Cavarly lands were owned and farmed by grandsons Philip and Julian Strong. One of the most active absentee traders was James Lassell of Windham. He was a proprietor who engaged in thirty-nine Kent land deals. But his brother, Joshua Lassell, was one of the original and most prominent Kent settlers. Joshua was selectman (town’s highest office), highway surveyor, tythingman, and grand juryman between 1740 and 1755.

The above group of 119 relative absentees takes a substantial bite from the total of 298 absentees. A second group of forty-two absentees takes a second bite from the “callous-land-jobber” category on the grounds that its members were immediate neighbors of Kent. These Kent land owners had their homes mostly in New Milford (bordering Kent to the south), and Sharon (to the northwest), with a scattering in Cornwall. There were also New Yorkers from the Oblong, Dover, and Amenia. Inasmuch as these neighbors farmed the same rocky soil and endured the same hardships as the Kent pioneers, they obviously were not a class apart.²⁶ In some cases, notably the Bostwicks of New Milford and Benoi Pack of Cornwall, their Kent lands lay on the border and were cultivated as part of the home farm.

²⁵ Dexter, Stiles’s *Itineraries*, 151. “Dr Eliot bo’t 600 acres in Kent for 240 pounds, now worth several thousand proc.” This sort of reference is typical of the writings of Stiles, who was himself an Akagi-Nettels type land jobber with holdings in Cornwall. Although men of this type were a minority, their writings have become a highly available source. The other side of the coin, that Eliot gave the land to Kent pioneer sons, has gone unnoticed, buried in land-title conveyances.

²⁶ The best description of hardship conditions in this region is found in Starr, *History of Cornwall*.

Absentees Pack and Bostwick lived closer to the Kent meeting-house than did many actual occupants of the eastern part of the town.

Most neighbors, however, owned Kent land for speculative rather than farming purposes. In 1754 the Barnums decided to sell off the iron-ore mine they had selected in the seventh division (pitch 43).²⁷ This small piece of land up above present-day Kent Falls Park was sold in 128 shares which brought about five pounds apiece. There were twenty-six purchasers of these shares who came from the neighboring towns (mostly Sharon) thus accounting for over half of the neighbor group. Without exception these neighbors were obscure persons making small purchases. It would seem that the speculative mania reached to the bottom of the economic scale and that where the wealthy might purchase large tracts in distant towns, the humble would take a few pounds and buy part of a lot in a neighboring town.

A third group of nineteen absentees is furthest of all from the standard concept of the eastern capitalist. This is a combination relative-neighbor group whose members would be eligible for, but have not been counted in either of the groups discussed above. It seemed that as large families moved into Kent, they would drop off a few brothers or sons in the neighboring towns. The Swifts, swarming into Kent from Sandwich, left Jabez' son Heman (a Revolutionary general) in Cornwall. All the while, Heman owned a parcel of Kent land. Enough Sanfords came to Kent to leave their name to "Sanford Brook" but brother Elihu never got beyond New Milford. And so it went with Hambelton, Strong, Sealey, Brownson, and many other families. They had relatives close by, living the same sort of life, but were absentee through the technicality of owning Kent land while residing just over the border.

With the fourth group of "small-investor absentees" we come closer to the usual picture of the eighteenth-century land speculator. This group contains names of ninety-one Kent

²⁷ Kent Land Records, IV, 521.

land owners who had no known close ties with Kent either through relatives using their land or their own proximity to the town. The men comprising this group fail, however, to support the thesis of class conflict and absentee control of land and political institutions because of the utter insignificance of their holdings. None held more than 150 pounds' worth of Kent land at any one time. The average for the group was thirty pounds and the average length of ownership was less than three years. One suspects that these "little fellows" from distant Hartford, Lebanon, Windham, and New London were valued customers rather than antagonists of the Kent settlers. What harm if Nat Baker, John Alford, or Peleg Brewster bought a Kent mountain wood lot for seventy pounds and sold it three years later for 110?

For the most part these ninety-one small purchasers were customers of the big absentees in their respective towns. Wherever an absentee proprietor was located, there appeared a cluster of small-fry purchasers to take the assorted lots and pitches off the proprietor's hands. Twenty-seven absentees, mostly small, lived in Windham alone; and this surprising concentration can be attributed to the dealings of such Windham proprietors as James Lassell and David Ripley. Proprietors John Davis and Ebenezer Marsh had their circle of customers in Litchfield as did the Silsbeys in Lebanon. This tendency for absentees to trade with absentees did keep some blocks of land out of cultivation and off the Kent tax lists.²⁸ (This situation lends some support to the standard view on evils of absenteeism.) At Kent, however, there is no evidence of resentment. Enough Kent settlers did buy from absentees to suggest there was a wide-open market and a rapid turnover. That a Windhamite sold Kent land most often to another Windhamite suggests merely that the latter was the handiest customer. The picture is certainly not one of good land being held off the market

²⁸ For discussion of the tax problem see Lawrence H. Gipson, "The Taxation of the Connecticut Towns, 1750-1775" (*Essays in Colonial History Presented to Charles McLean Andrews by his Students New Haven, 1931*), 284-299.

with frustrated settlers struggling to wrest ownership from a group of wealthy absentees.

Of the 298 absentees, 261 have been discussed above and have been more or less eliminated from the wealthy, land-jobber category. Some of the remaining thirty-seven men are at last the type of speculator that Turner, Akagi, and Nettels have written about. In this group are some of Connecticut's prominent "aristocrats" to whom Kent was just a wilderness corner where land profits might be made. William Williams the prominent patriot and signer of the Declaration of Independence, was a partner with Nathan Cerary in a quick 3000-pound transaction.²⁹ Williams' Tory opponent, Dr. Benjamin Gale, is among the thirty-seven as are Richard Jackson, Connecticut's Colonial Agent in London, and Oziel Hopkins. Most famous, and also most active, was William Samuel Johnson, a founding father at the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention in 1787. On the other hand, over half the thirty-seven "large investors" were relatively obscure men and made the "large" list only because their holdings exceeded a 150-pound arbitrary dividing line between large and small.

It seems significant, therefore, that of a grand total of 772 persons owning Kent land between 1738 and 1760, only thirty-seven, or five per cent, were the type around which so much of the history of land policy has been written.

The second point under consideration, comparison between number of transactions and profits of residents on the one hand and absentees on the other, helps confirm the relative insignificance of the absentee land speculators. For judging speculative activity, the writer has examined the 126 proprietors of Kent of whom eighty, or sixty-four per cent, were residents.³⁰ An arbitrary scoring system has been set up wherein each man is rated according to the number of lots he received in divisions (reflecting how many proprietary shares he held and how long he held them) and his total number of ordinary transactions (re-

²⁹ Kent Land Records, IV, 186.

³⁰ Tabulated from Kent Land Records.

flecting to some extent his interest, activity, and profit taking).³¹

On the basis of this system, local settler Joshua Lassell was the clear leader with 137 points. He was followed by three more solid Kent citizens, John Mills, Ebenezer Barnum, and Nathaniel Berry. The first absentee, William Samuel Johnson, was number five in the ranking with 102 points.³² In the top ten, Johnson was the only absentee. In the top twenty-five there were but three and in the top fifty, but nine. Men ranking fifty-one through one hundred, on the other hand, included twenty-nine absentees. And of the twenty-six tail-enders, nineteen were absentees including all the last six.

As for profits, the same pattern appears to hold as with trading activity. The locals were the big profiteers while the absentees sold out too early. This statement applies most strongly to the forty-one original proprietors who first journeyed to Windham in 1738 and bought their fifty shares at the auction.³³ Of

³¹ Proprietors only have been considered because:

(1) In a contest between locals and absentees based on size of profits the greatest champions for both sides were the proprietors. The group of 126 most active traders and the group of proprietors were virtually one and the same.

(2) Proprietor activity is more meaningful because proprietors represent a more permanent interest in Kent land. Proprietors averaged seven years on the Kent scene; non-proprietors only three.

(3) A table including all 772 Kent land owners bogs down on the 200-300 small "tail-enders" who only lived in Kent for a short while, or, if absentee, appear in the records for one purchase and no sales.

(4) By 1740 in the auction towns the word proprietor had ceased to carry a connotation of prestige, wealth, or privilege. The proprietary shares (which made one a proprietor) had nearly as rapid a turnover as parcels of good land. A settler might own three shares one year, none the next, and two the year following. Nathaniel Slosson, the "brander of horses," and John Beebe, who swept the meetinghouse for an annual salary of fifteen shillings, were proprietors.

The scoring system is based on counting lots in the first four divisions four points each. Lots in subsequent divisions count only two points as they were less valuable. Individual purchases or sales count one point each as most of these were mere slices of lots.

³² William Samuel Johnson first bought Kent land in 1755 near Bull's Bridge and continued as an active trader until 1792. He was interested exclusively in iron properties.

³³ Though most original proprietors bought one share only, Humphrey Avery (absentee) bought two, Ebenezer Barnum (local) bought four, Jonathan Dunham (absentee) two, Eleazer Hubbell (absentee) two, John Mills (local) two, and Abel Wright (local) three. Noah Rockwell and John Knapp (absentees) owned half shares.

these forty-one original proprietors, twenty-five were absentees who never came to Kent while the remaining sixteen moved to their newly bought land, erected cabins, and led in the founding of the town. All forty-one proprietors, local and absentee alike, stood to make a "killing." The average price paid for a proprietary share, or right, was 185 pounds (lowest acceptable bid, 165 pounds; highest, 201). This share entitled the proprietor to a lot in each of ten successive divisions. After 1740 as the settlement survived and flourished, land prices rose to a point where the value of a single division lot was higher than the original cost of the entire proprietary share.³⁴ By 1755 good land was bringing two to three pounds per acre and most of the early divisions each bestowed fine hundred-acre lots on the holders of proprietary shares.

A proprietor who held his share through all divisions and then sold all his accumulated lots and pitches could realize about a tenfold increase over his original investment. No proprietor followed this precise course, however. The Kent resident proprietors not only held on pretty well to the end but in addition engaged in much trading among themselves, with newcomers, and with absentees. As land prices continued to rise (they are said to have increased fourfold between 1750 and 1812),³⁵ these local proprietors apparently reaped a harvest greater even than the tenfold bonanza from the proprietary shares. On the other hand, the absentee proprietors sold out in two or three years. They did not even wait for the secure settlement of the town. Thus their gain was a mere ten to fifty per cent instead of the 1000 to 4000 per cent profits of the locals.

It is the twenty-five absentee proprietors who bought shares

³⁴ Kent Land Records. Sales by John Mills are an index of price trends. However, figures must be used cautiously because of inflation and the variety of monies in use. (Lawful money of Connecticut, lawful money of New York, pounds sterling, Proclamation money, new tenor bills of credit, and most of all, old tenor bills of credit.)

³⁵ Barzillai Slosson, *History of Kent*. Barzillai was a grandson of proprietor-settler Nathaniel Slosson. His brief manuscripts history was written in 1812 and is the earliest descriptive writing about Kent. Original manuscript at Yale Library.

at Windham who have attracted the attention of the historians. Akagi has checked the turnover of such proprietary shares in other towns and noted that few men lasted long as proprietors, thus offering evidence of absenteeism and speculation. What the situation in Kent shows, however, is that the absentee proprietors, at first a majority, sold their shares at insignificant profits to Kent residents. These absentees sold out and constituted thereafter an insignificant minority. Two of the original absentee proprietors sold to Kent pioneers within a month of their purchases at Windham auction. The first, Samuel Benedict, sold to Josiah Starr for the exact purchase price, 189 pounds, five shillings. The second, Ebenezer Bishop, made a nice profit of forty-six pounds selling to settler Nathaniel Slosson.³⁶ For two years there was relative inactivity while all proprietors collected lots in divisions one through four. Then the absentees unloaded in a rush. Between May 5, 1739 and April 4, 1740, nineteen of the remaining twenty-three absentees sold their shares in quick succession. In selling, they conveyed not only the right, or proprietary share, but also all land accumulated in divisions. Because the town was not yet firmly established and land prices were low, their average profit was only about thirty pounds, or fifteen per cent. Of these nineteen original absentees, Elisha Williams profited most by buying his share at Windham for 193 pounds and selling out for 250. Jacob Wanzer gained the least; indeed he sold out for the same price he had paid two years earlier.

This mass sell-out in 1739 left only four absentee proprietors from the original group of twenty-five. These four, Philip Cavalry, John and Knel Mitchell, and John Smith, all had family members using their lands. They were the only original absentee proprietors to hang on and make large profits but their family ties with Kent disqualify them from being rated absentees in the "callous, class-apart" sense.

There was a good reason for this sudden sell-out of absen-

³⁶ Margaret Seymour, "A Lawyer of Kent," Yale Library Publications (New Haven), II (August, 1935).

tees to locals. In order to avoid the evils of absenteeism, the Connecticut legislature provided that titles to this auction land would be confirmed only if the proprietor moved to Kent and “. . . by himself or his agent within the space of two full years enter upon the said granted premises, build and finish one house thereon not less than 18 feet square and seven feet stud; clear and fence seven acres of said land and continue thereon for the space of three successive years . . .”³⁷ Local historians have pointed with pride to such requirements but more sophisticated writers have minimized them and suggested poor enforcement. The conditions in Kent surely emphasize that the requirements were highly respected. As the two-year deadline came due, every proprietor either moved to Kent, established a son or brother on the property, or else sold out to a Kent resident.

While the absentee proprietors were selling out, what of the resident proprietors? The sixteen original resident proprietors were augmented by sixty-four more, who had bought from absentees, and these eighty locals constituted the backbone of the town. As the years passed, they reaped a bountiful harvest of lots and pitches. Almost all unloaded the land to newcomers and members of their own families and thus the records invariably show them making more sales than purchases. Sometimes the ratio of sales over purchases was five to one.³⁸

A significant aspect was the generous habit of making gifts of land to sons. Daniel Comstock, the shoemaker, gave his first-division lot to son Abel, his second-division lot to son Garshom, third to Eliphalet and so on down through a large family. Old Daniel ended up not much richer than when he started but the town was dotted with prosperous Comstock farms. This policy was followed by nearly every family. Today an entire area is named Skiff Mountain for the many Skiffs who

³⁷ Kent Land Records, 1, 38. This language is used in the recording of each purchase of an original proprietary share.

³⁸ Tabulated from Kent Land Records, Index, 1. For example, Ebenezer Barnum bought twenty-six times and sold forty-seven. Thomas Beeman bought eight times, sold twenty-five.

reaped eventual benefits from Joseph Skiff's original share and speculative dickerings. The names Fuller Mountain, Spooner Hill and Geer Mountain all testify to the fecundity and generosity of proprietors Joseph Fuller, William Spooner, and Ezra Geer. The greater part of the sons sold the division lots their fathers had given them and moved on to Vermont, New York, the Wyoming Valley, and the Western Reserve. The point is that they each went forth with a 200-pound stake, as much as their own fathers had used to buy the original share in Kent. We thus have a financial basis for the expansion, if not of all New England, at least of Kent.

One of the most important tasks in making a definitive examination of the relationship between absentee and local is the determination of comparative amounts of land held at any one time. What percentage of the total Kent acreage was owned by the absentees in, say, 1750? Important, but also a task of almost insurmountable complexity. By 1750 Kent was a patchwork of perhaps 1500 separate slices of land each of which had been bought and sold an average of three times. These slices were sold to absentees one year, bought back by locals the next, sold in complex, multiple transactions, and sold under descriptive conditions (piles of stones, old chestnut trees) that are meaningless today. It would take a lifetime's work to assemble the crazy quilt of lots and produce precise figures.

A number of clues suggest, however, that the percentage of absentee-owned acreage at any given time was small. First of all, there were no really big absentee land owners. Nowhere does one find individual holdings larger than 600 acres and these plots were located on the extreme borders of the town.³⁹ When, in 1751, land west of the Housatonic River was added to Kent and sold by the General Assembly, one might have expected big absentee land jobbers to do the buying. Absentees did buy (being on the spot at Hartford); but the twenty lots into which the region was divided were small (about 100 acres

³⁹ Proprietor's Map. Original at State Library, Hartford. Jared Eliot's 600 acres were on the New Milford border in southeast Kent.

each) and no one bought more than three lots. The average price for this poor land was less than one pound per acre and none of the buyers in selling to Kent residents made a profit of more than forty pounds.⁴⁰

In 1751 a complicated negotiation resulted in the granting by the General Assembly of 280 acres west of the Housatonic to William Williams. This was an eye-catching transaction, the sort that has figured prominently in creating the standard version on land jobbing by wealthy easterners. However, "land-jobber" Williams sold this land within a year to John Mills and Joseph Fuller of Kent. This transaction thus illustrates a second point. Even where absentees obtained fairly valuable plots, they seldom held on to them for long. Thus the proportion of locally owned land would tend to remain high despite the quick in-and-out thrusts of prominent absentees.

Probably the best systematic method for comparing resident and absentee holdings is to take the early divisions containing the best land and trace the ownership of each lot. The writer has followed this procedure with the first and fourth divisions. As already mentioned, there was a spectacular turnover of lots, some changing hands ten times in twenty years. But when the dust had settled, local pioneers were in possession. When the first division was completed in 1738, twenty-eight of the fifty lots went to residents and twenty-two to absentees. By 1739 seven of the absentees had sold out to residents leaving fifteen absentee lots. By the next year eight more had sold out (this was the year the settlement really got underway) and by 1745 three more had sold to locals. Of the last four absentees holding first division lots, one sold to a resident in 1755, a second, Richard Hubbell, was a member of the prominent Kent Hubbell family, and the last two absentee holders left no evidence of any kind. Their lots, 39 and 43, simply disappear from the records.

The fourth division tells a similar story. It started in 1739 with thirty-eight local owners and twelve absentees. By 1745

⁴⁰ Tabulated from Kent Land Records. In the Index these lists are designated "West of Housatonic."

three of the absentees had sold to locals, by 1750, four more, and by 1760, one more. Four lots remained in the hands of absentees until late in the century.

Summarizing, it seems safe to make these generalizations: the absentees made small purchases and held them for short periods of time; they dealt in the less desirable lands; and their total ownership of Kent lands probably did not amount to more than ten per cent of all Kent acreage at any given time after settlement in 1740. Adding these determinations to the earlier conclusions, that only five per cent of the land owners were the sort of absentee jobbers described by Turner, Akagi, Nettels, et al. and that their profits were insignificant compared to those of the locals, one may conclude that Kent offers a notable exception to the standard picture.

Kent's history suggests that many writers may have been too eager to sort out and then wrap up colonials in neat class packages. Following Turner, they drop the "poor restless" package on the frontier and place the "prosperous gentry" package in the comfortable eastern towns. Antagonism follows. Kent, however, featured a hybrid package, a mass of settlers in neither extreme camp. Local speculator John Mills gained wealth to match his poise, dignity, and qualities of leadership. Eastern gentry type? He would hardly seem so when one notes his rough cabin, his back-breaking labors, and his dangerous life (he was drowned while working at Bull's Bridge). Even Mills's sons preserved the "which-class?" confusion. Two were educated at Yale and Samuel Mills went on to fame as a clergyman-author. Grandson Samuel is covered in the *Dictionary of American Biography*. But Philo Mills became Kent's tavern keeper, Lewis Mills ran the village trading post, and Peter Mills carried on the family farm. These hybrid Kent settler-speculators—Millses, Comstocks, Fullers, Barnums, Swifts, and Hatches—poured into and through Kent, scheming, land jobbing, taking profits, clearing the wilderness.

There can be no denying the existence of absenteeism, indebtedness, and violent controversies in many towns, particularly

in Vermont, New Hampshire, and western Massachusetts. That bitter story, that side of the balance sheet, has been emphasized, as might have been expected during the years when class-struggle literature was most popular. Kent seems important, however, not only because it shows the bright side of the balance sheet, but also because its records suggest undercurrents of harmony and prosperity that may have existed in all towns more than hitherto suspected. The dealings of the big absentee speculators that have been studied are relatively prominent in central archives; the stories of their local rivals and of relative percentages, profits and acreages have gathered dust in local town clerks' offices.