

Mansfield Memories: The governor and the earl - How Mansfield got its name

By Kevin McNatt and Andrew Todesco

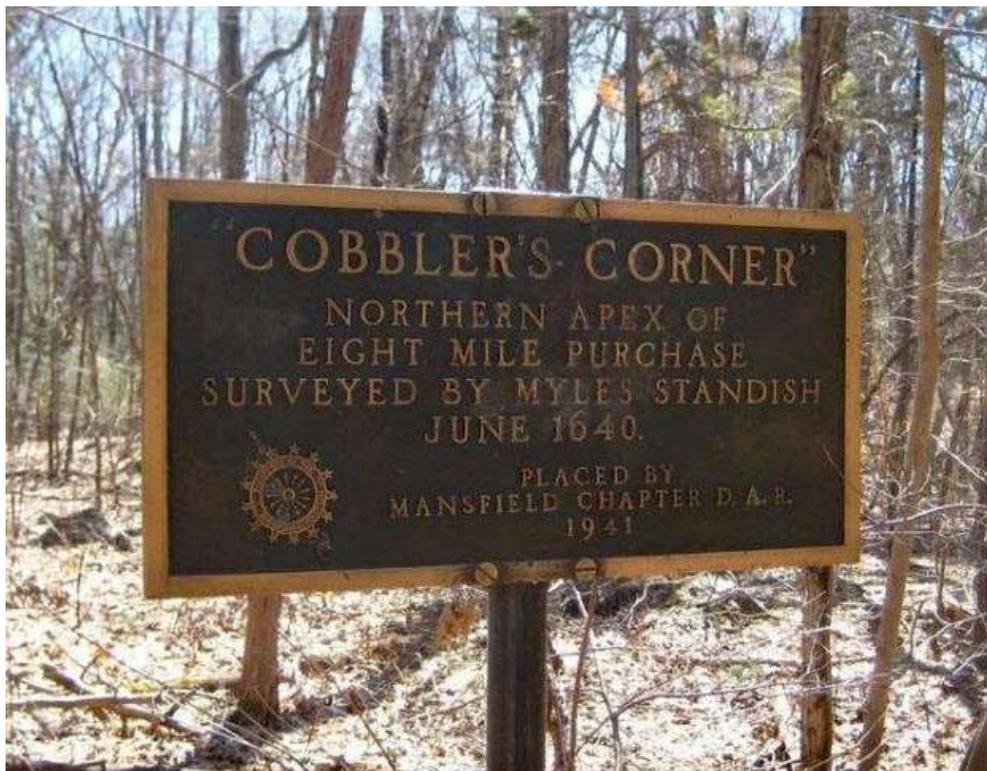
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MANSFIELD - What's in a name? In the name "Mansfield" we find connections to our colonial past and a link to our sister city in England.

First consider Mansfield's journey to becoming a town. It is widely agreed that before the coming of European settlers, the area that is now Mansfield had little Native American history. The land was a buffer zone. To the north were the Massachusetts natives, to the south were the Wampanoags.

Natives came to what is now Mansfield to hunt, fish and set up summer camps. But there appears to have been no major native settlements.

Plymouth Colony was settled in 1620. By 1637 settlers had migrated 25 miles west to what is now Taunton. Taunton was granted town status by Plymouth Colony in 1639. The following year Captain Myles



Captain Myles Standish led a survey team into what is now Mansfield in 1640. A member of Standish's team stopped to cobble his shoe near what is now Willow Street in Mansfield. "Cobbler's Corner" remains a landmark in the woods off Willow Street.

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The Town of Taunton originally encompassed what is now Mansfield, Norton, Easton, Raynham, Berkley and Dighton. In time they would peel away and become their own towns. In 1711, Norton gained its independence from Taunton. The new town consisted of what we now know as Norton, Mansfield and Easton.

Easton broke away from Norton in 1725. By that time the people of northern Norton (now Mansfield) were looking for independence too. They had grown weary of the long weekly trips to Norton for church services over crude roads in all types of weather.

Norton's Town Meeting was not willing to relinquish its northern area. But after a few failed attempts, the Norton North Precinct was approved in 1731. Many in Norton refused to recognize the vote. They



Colonial Governor Thomas Hutchinson, left, named the town of Mansfield in honor of William Murray, right, the First Earl of Mansfield, England, who was Chief Justice of the King's Bench.

appealed to the authorities in Boston claiming the vote was illegal. It did no good. The Norton North Precinct (now Mansfield) came into existence in 1731.

This allowed the precinct to hire a minister and build a meetinghouse. Residents completed these tasks and the Norton North Precinct remained for 39 years. In 1770, residents petitioned the General Court to become a district. This would give them all the privileges of a town except the right to send a representative to the General Court in Boston.

The General Court approved the district request and sent it to colonial governor Thomas Hutchinson to sign. The petition did not include a district name, so it appears Governor Hutchinson bestowed the name “Mansfield” in honor of William Murray, the First Earl of Mansfield, England, who was Chief Justice of the King’s Bench.

Perhaps Hutchinson admired the Earl. Maybe he hoped to curry favor with him. Either way he selected a distinguished jurist after whom to name the district. Chief Justice was the highest judicial position in the entire British Empire. Lord Mansfield was a reformer who modernized the British court system. His most important case was *Somerset vs Stewart*, a landmark on the way to banning slavery and the slave trade in the British Empire.

The Town of Mansfield came in to existence on August 23, 1775, at the onset of the American Revolution. That day the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts passed a resolution immediately elevating all districts to the status of a town. And so the Town of Mansfield came to be.

In the early 20th century Mansfield, Massachusetts returned to its roots and struck up a lasting friendship with its sister city of Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, England. The connection lasts to this day. The First Earl of Mansfield would surely be pleased.