

NELSON PARK AND MEMORIAL LIBRARY
NORTH GRAFTON, MASS.
ITS HISTORY AND PURPOSE



Prepared by Board of Trustees—1963

Trustees of Nelson Park and Memorial Library 1935 to 1963

- 1935 thru 1941 — Philip H. Wing, George R. Brooks, Leroy L. Knowlton.
- 1942 — Philip H. Wing, George R. Brooks, Henry D. Ainsworth.
- 1943 — Philip H. Wing, Henry D. Ainsworth, William H. Davenport.
- 1944 — George R. Brooks, Henry D. Ainsworth, William H. Davenport.
- 1945 thru 1949 — George R. Brooks, William H. Davenport, Leroy L. Knowlton.
- 1950 — James H. Allen, William H. Davenport, Leroy L. Knowlton.
- 1951 — James H. Allen, Alfred D. Riggs, William H. Davenport
Note—Mr. Riggs resigned and Joseph A. Aldrich appointed.
- 1952 — James H. Allen, William H. Nason Jr., Joseph A. Aldrich.
- 1953 thru 1955 — William H. Nason Jr., Joseph A. Aldrich, Carlton S. Ryerson.
- 1956 — Lester M. Johnson, Joseph A. Aldrich, Carlton S. Ryerson.
Note:—Carlton S. Ryerson resigned at end of 1956.
- 1957 thru 1963 — Lester M. Johnson, E. Kendall Morgan, John B. Knowlton

NELSON PARK AND MEMORIAL LIBRARY

ITS HISTORY & PURPOSE

INTRODUCTORY FORE-WORD

As requested by numerous residents, the Trustees of Nelson Park and Memorial Library have prepared the following resume' covering the history and purpose of this 18 acre public park and branch library.

The Memorial Library Building is located at the intersection of Elm Street and Nelson Street in North Grafton, on Nelson Park land. It is maintained to serve the inhabitants of Grafton as their North Grafton branch of the free public library, and as a community center for educational and social activities. The library is presently open on Monday and Thursday afternoons from 1 until 8 p.m..

In addition to the library, the building contains a community hall with seating capacity for fifty persons, a reception room with grand piano, and a kitchen with electric range, all on the ground floor. The second floor contains three rooms for use of the Girl Scouts, 4-H Girls and similiar activities. There is also a large hall originally designed for American Legion quarters, but now rented to the North Grafton Fish and Game Club.

The community hall, reception room and kitchen are all available for the use of any resident of the town. For private use for family re-unions, wedding receptions, or showers there is a small charge. The same facilities are available at no cost to Town Committees, and charitable or educational organizations. Reservations should always be made with the caretaker sufficiently in advance to avoid conflict of dates. There are spacious porches and lawns that can be used when the weather permits. The interior of the building is finished with wood-carving of unusual interest. The 18 acres ground includes two ball fields.

Being a public park, no admission fee can be charged to enter the grounds when special events are conducted. No intoxicating liquor is permitted on the property. Because of the children who are encouraged to play about the yard, motor vehicles are excluded except as necessary for the delivery of supplies. Drivers, at such times, should use extreme care to avoid danger of injury to any of these young folks.

The Trustees are grateful to the many persons who have contributed to the historical outline that follows. Special thanks is extended to Mrs. Bertha Hutchinson of Shrewsbury (a grand-neice of Jasper S. Nelson) for the use of her private records, and her gift, in keeping with her mother's wishes, of the portrait of Jasper S. Nelson that now hangs in the entrance hall of the Library Building. We also wish to mention Mrs. Alice Wing Davenport for her gift of an etching in memory of her parents who were closely associated with Mr. Nelson for many years, and for her help in finding some of the facts contained in the historical notes. Her brother Mr. Phillip Wing, one of the first

trustees, also Mr. Raymond Jordan, were also very helpful in checking dates and events.

Any reader who may find errors, or who can supply facts of interest that we have failed to record, is urged to so advise the Trustees, in order that it may be recorded for inclusion in any later edition.

Lester M. Johnson

E. Kendall Morgan

John B. Knowlton

Trustees, as of 1963.

1963 RESUME' OF NELSON PARK and MEMORIAL LIBRARY

Nelson Park and Memorial Library was a gift to the Town of Grafton under the will of Charles H. Nelson, in memory of his father, Jasper S. Nelson.

Jasper S. Nelson, son of Josiah and Sophie (Goddard) Nelson, was born in 1822, and grew up on the same Shrewsbury farm that his ancestors had owned and worked since 1760. The farm-house still stands at No. 543 Lake Street in the southerly part of Shrewsbury, less than two miles northerly from Nelson Park. It is presently occupied by the Day family, Mrs. Day being a grand-neice of Jasper S. Nelson. Jasper and his brother Luther Nelson made shoes from 1845 until 1848 in a small shop (10 feet by 13 feet) that was located on their father's farm on the opposite side of Lake Street from the farm-house. A picture of this little shop hangs in the adult's reading room at the library. Copies of the same picture were long used to adorn the cardboard boxes in which the Nelson Shoes manufactured in North Grafton were sold.

In 1848, Jasper S. Nelson, seeking larger quarters nearer the B&A Railroad Station that had opened in 1832, came to the area of Nelson Park to join in a partnership with a former Grafton man by the name of James H. Stone for the manufacture of shoes. Their first shop apparently was located in a building at the corner of present North Main Street and Westboro Street, where stores were later operated by George Hartness and more recently (until 1962) by Joseph Wilson. The Nelson-Stone venture proved succesful and they soon outgrew their first shop. They then bought from Solomon Brigham the plot of land with a large yellow barn located on the northerly side of the railroad and on the opposite side of Nelson Street from the present library. The yellow barn was about 30 feet wide and 40 feet long, and was used as a shop in addition to the old quarters. In 1857 Mr. Nelson bought Mr. Stone's interest in the business, and operated as sole owner until 1869 at which time he admitted another partner by the name of Rugg. The yellow barn soon proved inadequate for the needs of the business so Mr. Nelson built the first part of a new factory to the north of the yellow barn. Further additions followed from time to time until 1881, when the building had grown to dimensions of approximately 30 feet wide by 260 feet long, with a considerable part of four storys in height. The yellow barn was converted to a paper box factory and connected to the new shop by a bridge. It was operated by a man named Storey, who made the paper boxes in which the shoes were sold.

Jasper S. Nelson has been recorded in many instances as an outstanding businessman and citizen of the highest character. He was a pioneer in the

development and manufacture of men's "Dress Shoes" in contrast to the more crude "Boots" that preceded them. He was also among the first of the shoe manufacturers to recognize and fully exploit the application of machine production of shoes. He was able to, and did, maintain the good-will and respect of his employees and customers, and he was highly respected in the community as a good and able man. He did not seek public office, but promoted public betterments, and did serve as a member of the Board of Selectmen in the war years of 1863 and 1864. He was also Representative to the General Court in 1870. For thirty years he lived with his family in a small house at the corner of what is now Elm Street and Prentice Street, on land that is now a part of the Library lawn. There were three children, two girls, both of whom died while in their teens, and one son, Charles H. Nelson, who later became the donor of Nelson Park and Memorial Library. Charles was born in 1852, and educated in the local grammar and High School (Then called Grafton Academy). His schooling was continued at the Bryant & Stratton Business College in Boston. When he became of lawful age in 1873 he was admitted to the shoe business in partnership with his father and Mr. Rugg. In 1877 Mr. Rugg sold his interest in the business to the Nelson father and son at which time the business name was changed to "J. S. Nelson & Son.". The name so remained until 1888, at which time the business was incorporated and became "J. S. Nelson & Son Shoe Co." and Charles H. Nelson became president and treasurer of the corporation. Approximately 200 persons were employed at the factory during the prosperous years that followed, and annual sales reached a value of about a half million dollars. This was big business for that period when one could build a good five-room house for fifteen hundred dollars.

In 1878 or thereabout Jasper Nelson built the easterly wing of the present library building. A picture of this original building can be found in Pierce's History of Grafton. Jasper Nelson then moved his family from his older residence on Prentice Street (then just a lane, the house being on what is now the Library lawn) to the new "Mansion House" and lived there until his death in 1884 at age of 62. His wife, Mary (Wheelock) Nelson survived him by twelve years. Their graves, along with those of their two daughters and other relatives can be found at the foot of the hill on the northerly side of Pine Grove Cemetery in North Grafton.

About two years after his father's death, Charles H. Nelson started to build the westerly wing of the present library building. This undertaking, with the other elaborate improvements that he made in the house and on the grounds, extended over a period of several years. The changes included the moving of four buildings from their former locations on the grounds to provide space for landscaping around the mansion. The barn, that had been directly behind the mansion was moved to a new spot about one hundred fifty feet northerly. The so-called "O'Connell House", that had been on what is now the north lawn was moved to its present location at No. 5 Windle Ave. The Old Nelson house that had stood on the south lawn was moved to what is now No. 14 Elm Street, where it still stands, altho greatly improved and altered. A second house that had occupied the south lawn, but northerly

of the Nelson house, was moved to No. 3 Prentice Street, where it still stands in 1963. In 1887, Charles Nelson bought from Noah Merriam a large tract of land that extended along the Boston & Albany Railroad from the river at the lower end of the Lake Quinsigamond to a point east of Bummet Brook. He used part of this Merriam land, together with other land that he acquired from the Gilman Young farm, to enlarge his home grounds to include the eighteen acres now included in Nelson Park. He used other portions of the land to develop Elm Street, Prentice Street (formerly called Orchard St.), Nelson Place and various other locations for the erection of houses for his supervisory employees. Much of the remainder of the Merriam purchase was later sold, but the Town inherited, and still owns, two parcels of woodland from Merriam property. The larger plot contains about 23 acres adjacent to, and east of Bummet Brook, immediately north of the B. & A. Railroad. The other plot contains ten acres above water (three below) located on the northerly side of the B. & A. R.R, immediately east of the outlet of Lake Quinsigamond. Sketches, showing this land, also land in Millbury appear on following pages.

Charles Nelson continued to operate the shoe business with vigor and success for about twenty years after his father's death. In June of 1897 he married Annie Brown, who had been in his employ as a clerk and book-keeper. They lived in the present Library Building, and kept elaborate orchards and gardens on the grounds. No children were born to them. About 1900 Mr. Nelson's health began to fail, and by 1905 he was too ill to carry on, and liquidated the business. He died on December 30, 1905, at age of 54.

Mr. Charles Nelson's wife, Annie, survived him by twenty eight years. In 1922 she took as a second husband, Walter G. Wesson, and continued to live in the same house until her death in 1934. There were no children. Her grave can be found in Riverside Cemetery. Mr. Nelson's remains were cremated-no grave can be found.

Charles H. Nelson left a will that he had written in 1898, supplemented by codicils written in 1902. The will and codicil provide numerous bequests to relatives, friends, church, and educational institutions, but left the major portion of his property in trust for the use of his wife, so long as she might live. It was further provided that upon her death the 18 acre home grounds, mansion, and residue of the money in the trust be given to "The inhabitants of Grafton" as a public park and library in memory of Charles Nelson's father, Jasper S. Nelson. The will imposed several conditions to be met by the Town in order to enable the Town to claim the property. The details can be explained by the following quotations taken from the will and codicil.

EXTRACTS FROM THE WILL AND CODICIL OF

CHARLES H. NELSON

FROM THE WILL, WRITTEN IN 1898

Item 8 Paragraph 3 "At the decease of my said wife, I give and devise and herein order my said Executors and Trustees, or the survivor of them, or

those at the time in the discharge of the trust, to convey to the Inhabitants of the Town of Grafton my home estate with all the buildings thereon for the purpose of a park to be known forever as Nelson Park, and on condition that the same is to be kept entire and without division for such public purpose, and if this condition is broken or forfeited by the Town of Grafton, the same shall revert to my heirs. The said estate is generally described as follows:

It is situated in North Grafton on the west side of Main Street* by which it is partly bounded on the east, and it is otherwise bounded by the new road running past the Boston and Albany Railroad Station of North Grafton on the north thereof, and the new roads laid out over the Merriam Farm* to the Creeper Hill road and by said Creeper Hill road and by lands of Young, Smith, Brooks, Stowe, Allen, Prentice, and Kelley."

Par. 4. "At the decease of my said wife, I give and bequeathe and direct my said Trustees, or the survivor of them, or whoever shall be in execution of said trust, to pay over to the Town of Grafton the sum of Twenty Thousand (\$20,000) Dollars to be by the said Town under the further provisions of this will, used for the erection of a Memorial Library building to be devoted to a Free Public Library in memory of my late father Jasper S. Nelson, and to be known as the Nelson Memorial and Library Building, and this building shall be erected in the discretion of the trustees as to the time and location upon the Nelson Park just hereinbefore provided for; said hereinafter appointed Trustees having the right to use my present mansion house for such time as they see fit for library purposes, and to include it or not as they see fit in the Memorial Library building, or to make use of it in connection therewith; meaning to give to the Trustees hereinafter provided for the absolute discretionary control of the erection of said building and the use of the other buildings upon the land given for Nelson Park.

For the expenditure of the money herein provided for and the erection and care of the said Library building, the Town of Grafton shall elect at its annual Town Meetings held for the election of town officers three (3) Trustees whose paternal and maternal ancestors for three generations shall have been of American birth. At the first election of said Trustees, one of them shall be chosen for one year, one for two years, and one for three years, and thereafter at each recurring annual meeting one member of the board shall be chosen to fill the vacancy occasioned by the expiration of the term of the retiring member, but no member shall be eligible for re-election more than twice without having been retired from the Board for at least one year, and two at least of said trustees shall always be from North Grafton. To the Board of Trustees thus chosen shall be committed the expenditure of the moneys given for this purpose, and the control and government of the Library and building connected therewith, and such Trustees shall render annual reports of their doings under their trust to the Town, which shall be published in the usual town reports."

Note*: The streets mentioned as Main Street, and the new roads past the Boston and Albany Railroad and over the Merriam farm are now known as Nelson Street, Elm Street and Prentice Street, respectively.

From the second codicil — written in October of 1902

Par. 5. "I give, devise and bequeath to the said town of Grafton, all the rest, residue and remainder of said residuary trust fund to be paid over by my said trustees, after the decease of my said wife, and to be placed under the control of the trustees named above so to be elected to control the fund provided above for the building of and care for the Memorial Library building.

I direct that all my books, pictures, book-cases, rugs, my piano forte and paper-sack and other articles of virtue, which I may own at the time of my decease, shall be made use of in furnishing the library building hereinbefore provided for.

All the balance of said trust fund shall be held in trust by said Town of Grafton through the agency of said trustees to be so elected as aforesaid, and used for the maintenance of the Nelson Park above provided for, and the Memorial Library building above provided for and for the library itself."

The above will and codicil was filed January 24, 1906, allowed February 6, 1906 and is recorded at Worcester County Courthouse in Volume 626 page 443.

The Town, at its annual meeting on February 9, 1935, voted to accept Mr. Nelson's bequest; and elected Phillip H. Wing, George R. Brooks and Leroy L. Knowlton as the first Board of Trustees.

This first Board faced numerous problems. The \$20,000 provided under the will was not enough to cover the cost of a new library building. If the Nelson Mansion were altered to accommodate the library, then the income from the trust fund would not be sufficient to maintain and operate the Park and Library. After careful study of the Nelson Mansion building and grounds, the Trustees worked out a plan that seemed to them to be the most workable solution. The Trustees would use a relatively small part of the Nelson trust fund to convert the Mansion Building into a suitable library and community hall. They would ask the regular Town Library department to move the North Grafton Branch of the Town library from its then unsuitable quarters in the Perry Hill school-house to the Nelson Mansion and there operate rent-free as a branch library under the regular Town budget. The Trustees would maintain the building and grounds with the anticipated income of approximately \$1600 per year from the Nelson trust fund, supplemented when necessary by additional funds to be appropriated by the Town. This plan was approved by Probate Court on November 8, 1935, and \$5,000 was allocated from the Nelson bequest to cover the cost of the alterations as planned.

The North Grafton Branch Library moved into the front rooms of the Mansion Building on December 30, 1935, and operated there during the construction activities that were in progress during 1936 and part of 1937. The Trustees were able to complete the alterations, including community hall, American Legion quarters, and other facilities in addition to purchasing most of the library furniture, a new oil burner, and a memorial plaque in memory of Mr. Nelson, all within the \$5,000 dollars allocated.

The care with which the first Trustees performed their task has been proven by the twenty odd years that elapsed before any further major improve-

ments were necessary. This first Board also elected to place the money and securities received from the Nelson bequest in a Trust Account with professional investment management by the Worcester Trust Co. (now Worcester 7

County National Bank). The Trustees that followed have continued this policy. Altho all interest and dividends from the fund have been used to maintain the park and library, the market value of the fund has grown from the original \$50,000 to approximately \$85,000 as of 1963. Of this increase approximately \$6,000 was the result of the sale of land that had been included in the bequest.

In 1937 Route No. 140 (Shrewsbury St.) was rerouted to eliminate a grade crossing of the B. & A. railroad at the southerly end of what is now Nelson St., near the pedestrian underpass. The new section of Route No. 140 was at that time allowed to pass thru the Nelson Park property and thereby divide it into two parts. This was done with the approval of all other heirs of the Nelson estate, who were most considerate in granting their cooperation. The six acre plot thereby set apart between Route No. 140 and Creeper Hill Road at that time contained an apple orchard. In 1938 a hurricane severely damaged the orchard and destroyed many ornamental trees around the park and library building. The orchard was subsequently removed, and many new plantings were made around the library building by members of the North Grafton Women's Club and the William Delisle Post of American Legion. Somewhat later, about 1953, the former apple orchard plot was planted with 125 evergreen trees by the Trustees, and has since been maintained as a beauty spot at the northerly approach to the town.

The former Nelson barn served no useful purpose and was razed in 1953 because of the hazard to children. Only the back ell was retained to serve as a storage place for lawn mowers and tools.

A second hurricane brought torrential rains in 1953 that flooded the library cellar and caused considerable damage. Better drainage was installed the following year.

Except for outside painting in 1951, the library building required few major repairs from the time of the 1937 alterations until 1958. By that time the roof had developed serious leakage and the iron water pipes were causing trouble due to rusting and leakage. The year 1958 thru 1961 were active ones in the rehabilitation of the roof, water pipes, electric wiring, chimneys, oil burner, inside and outside paint, and window drapes. Heavy duty lawn mowing equipment was acquired and considerable grading and clearing of portions of the grounds accomplished, so that the grounds could be made more attractive.

The former Nelson Shoe factory building stood on the plot of land on the easterly side of Nelson Street between the B. & A. R. R. and Windle Ave. from 1850 until 1935. The Nelson family, after liquidation of their shoe business in 1905 had leased this property to the Forbush Shoe Co. who later (1910) bought it from the Nelson estate. The Forbush Shoe Co. was dissolved about ten years later and the land and factory was purchased by a man named Fitch who used it as a yeast factory until the building was destroyed by fire in 1935. In 1944 the Town of Grafton bought the land from Fitch for \$1,200, and placed it in the care of the Trustees for future use as a part of

Nelson Park. The first step in the development of this land was taken in 1962 when a large well (approximately 40 feet long and 12 to 15 feet deep) located adjacent to Windle Ave., and about 50 feet east of Nelson Street was judged unsafe because of a weak roof. The well was filled with stones in the spring of 1963, and the stones were obtained by removing and grading the old foundation walls that were, in themselves, hazardous, because of their eight-foot vertical drop. The well had served in the 1890 period as one source of the Town water supply, and had been capable of delivering as much as 1500 gallons of water per minute thru pumps in the Nelson Shoe Co. power-house. Its use was discontinued prior to 1930.

The boundary of the above plot of land extends somewhat further on the easterly side than indicated by the deed from Fitch to the Town. This is due to a small triangular piece of land that was not included in land sold by the Trustees to Windle in 1952. It extends approximately 20 feet easterly along the railroad beyond the south-easterly corner of the Fitch conveyance, then runs northerly in a straight line to the north-easterly corner of the Fitch conveyance at Windle Ave. The deed to Windle does not make it clear that this small triangle was retained by the Town, but a careful review of the compass bearings and distances proves that such is the case, and an iron pipe is driven in the ground marking the true south-easterly corner of the property.

NELSON PARK & LIBRARY

Comments by the Trustees of Nelson Park

To understand the reason that prompted Mr. Nelson to leave the major portion of the Nelson property to the Town, one must consider the character of the man himself, the times in which he lived, and the changes that have taken place since.

In 1898 and 1902, when the will and codicil were prepared, Mr. Nelson was, by the standards of the time, an extremely wealthy man. He had no children, and no close relatives. The Nelson mansion and grounds that he owned could not be maintained except by a person of considerable wealth. Mr. Nelson took great pleasure, as a nature lover, in the elaborate gardens and ornaments that he had provided on the estate. He was an ardent supporter of community betterments, law and order. He was almost a radical in his opposition to the traffic in intoxicating liquor that had caused him some trouble among his employees. Any thing that he could do to promote healthy use of leisure time such as reading and recreation was always willingly done. He appears to have been a rather tense man, and somewhat a slave to his business. Unlike his father, he did not take partners into the business to share the load of management.

The automobile, motor truck and airplane did not appear in workable form until after 1902. The steam railroad was at the peak of its power. Mr. Nelson believed that the future development of North Grafton most certainly would be concentrated along the B.&A. Railroad. He undoubtedly pictured

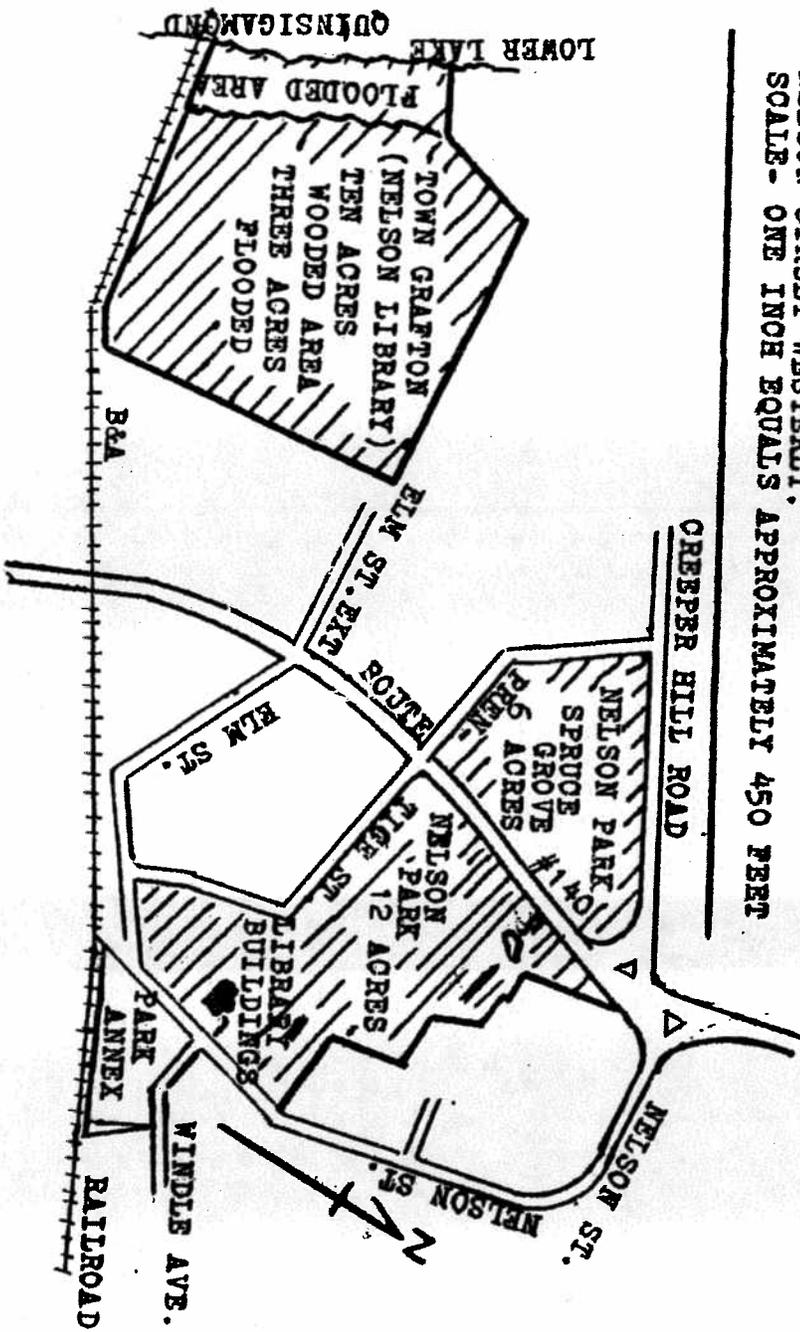
Nelson Park as fulfilling the same need for the future village that Central Park did for New York. He could not foresee the lean years following the 1929

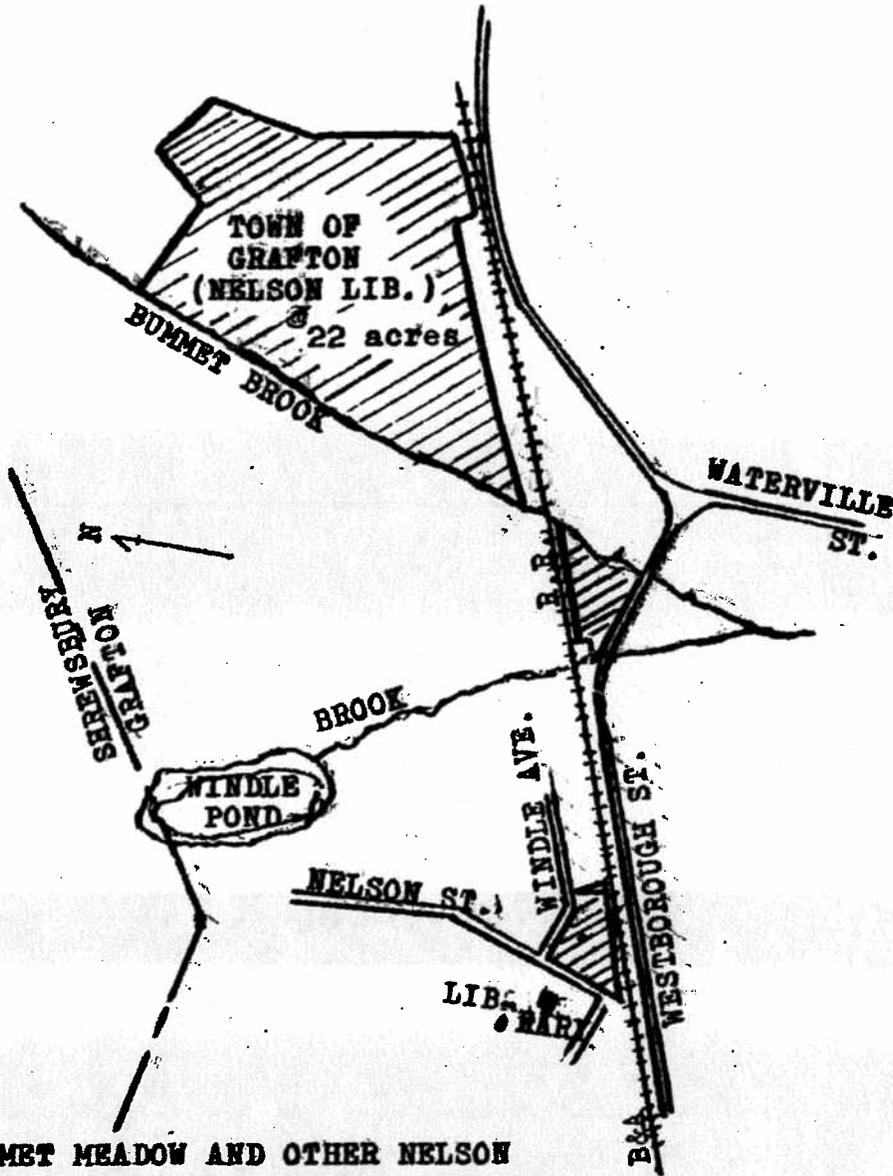
panic, nor the wars and the currency inflation that were to follow. Had conditions continued as they appeared in 1902, the money received by the Town would have been ample to operate a most elaborate park and library indefinitely without need for any additional funds from the taxpayers. The plantings that Mr. Nelson had nurtured and enjoyed would remain for the pleasure of the public, and serve as a reminder of his father's good works. All this appeared possible in addition to making ample provisions for his wife for as long as she might live, and also after providing, as he did, substantial bequests to numerous relatives, friends, charities and church. His reasoning was sound when he set aside \$20,000 for a new library building-based on 1902 prices, but by 1937, when the Town received the money, costs had risen greatly. In reviewing a 1905 newspaper account of Mr. Nelson's death, the writer noticed a market advertisement on the same page that offered sirloin steaks for ten cents per pound, and corned beef at six cents. The common wage for unskilled labor was not more than fifteen cents per hour. Mr. Nelson's decision was not a hurried one, as proved by the four years that elapsed between the time that he wrote the original will and the codicil that verified and expanded his bequest.

His provision that the park, library, and trust fund be administered by Trustees with a long line of American-born ancestors can perhaps be attributed to the misconduct of certain of the numerous immigrants that appeared in North Grafton while Mr. Nelson was manager of the shoe factory. Some of the Old Country customs, together with labor trouble and intemperance was experienced during the 1890's. Mr. Nelson was annoyed, and thought the the American "Melting Pot" would require three generations for proper fusion. He apparently tried to make the Trustees free of political interference, having himself disapproved of some of the public-office seekers of that period.

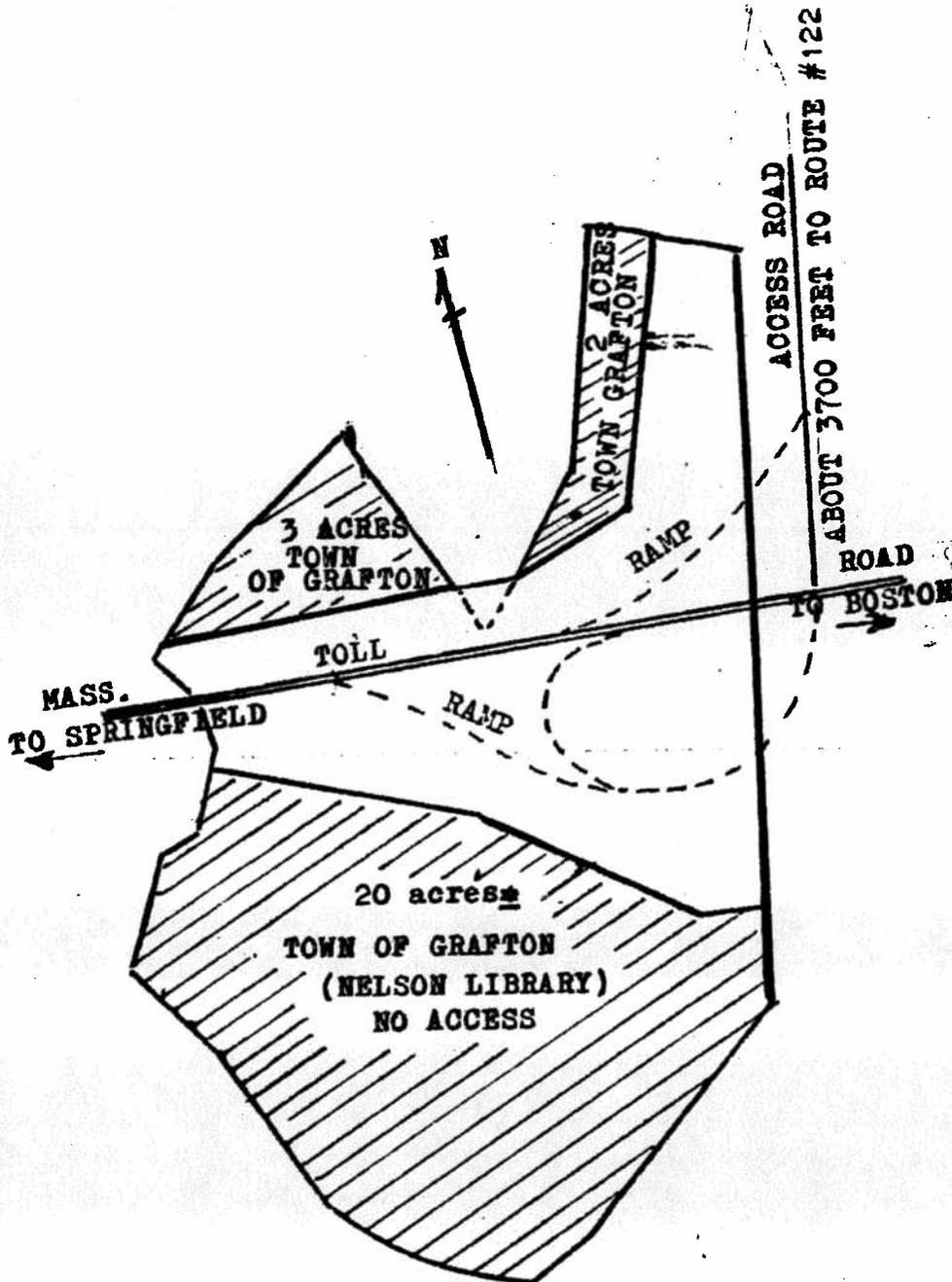
After Mr. Nelson's death, his plans were not fully realized because: First—the shoe factory was no longer a going concern and yielded little of value to his estate. Second—the value of his securities were greatly reduced during the 1929 to 1933 panic. Third—the devaluation of the dollar reduced the purchasing power of the cash items in his estate. Fourth—the inflation that followed the panic sent building and operating costs far beyond any figure that could be imagined in 1902. Fifth—neither the steam railroad nor North Grafton continued to grow in the manner expected by Mr. Nelson.

SECTION SHOWING NELSON PARK PROPERTY FROM
 NELSON STREET WESTERLY.
 SCALE - ONE INCH EQUALS APPROXIMATELY 450 FEET





**BUMMET MEADOW AND OTHER NELSON
 PARK LAND EAST OF NELSON STREET**
 Scale-one inch =approx. 600 feet
 See Book 1233 Page 626-628 for deed



LAND IN MILLBURY OWNED BY TOWN OF GRAFTON
(NELSON LIBRARY) IN 1963. ACCESS LOST BY
TAKING OF MASS. TOLL ROAD AUTHORITY IN 1957.
SCALE ONE INCH EQUALS APPROX. 400 FEET.