

When They Burned Peat in Middleton

By LURA WOODSIDE WATKINS

THE word peat connotes Ireland and its bogs. In Ireland peat is still used for fuel. It is less well known that "turf," as it was usually called in New England, was a common fuel here in the first half of the nineteenth century and even as late as 1870. This was notably true in Essex County where there were no fewer than 21,000 acres of peat bog.

How early the Middleton farmers availed themselves of this inexpensive heating substance it is hard to say. Its use must have coincided with the gradual disappearance of the forest and a plentiful wood supply. The clearing of the land for tillage and pasturage and the cutting of trees to feed the sawmills had left the countryside far more open than it is today. George Washington, visiting Essex County in 1789, says in his diary of the scenery between Boston and Salem, "The Country seems to be in a manner entirely stripped of wood." By the middle of the nineteenth century Middleton, too, had been stripped of its original trees. Persons now living can remember when whole areas now wooded were almost bare.

The earliest reference to peat that I have found in Middleton records occurs in the account book of Colonel Benjamin Peabody and is dated October 11, 1790. Peabody charged Eleazer Brown, Jr., one shilling, six pence, "For my oxen to draw turf." Three years later Isaac Ken-

ney left to his son Asa by will "one third of the turf house." In the Direct Tax of 1798 this building is described as being seventeen feet long by thirteen feet wide. Stephen Richardson, whose house is still standing on South Main Street, is also mentioned in this census as having "a Peatt house" twenty-five feet by twelve, and the description of the estate of Amos Felton notes "one Peet house seventeen feet long and thirteen wide" valued at fifteen dollars, which stood on "a track in Pout Pond meadow."

Pout Pond meadow ran across the town from west to east, following the course of the stream so named that flows into Ipswich River. Since a great many earlier inhabitants owned an acre or so in Pout Pond meadow, it seems probable that they were utilizing the lots for turf cutting long before 1790.

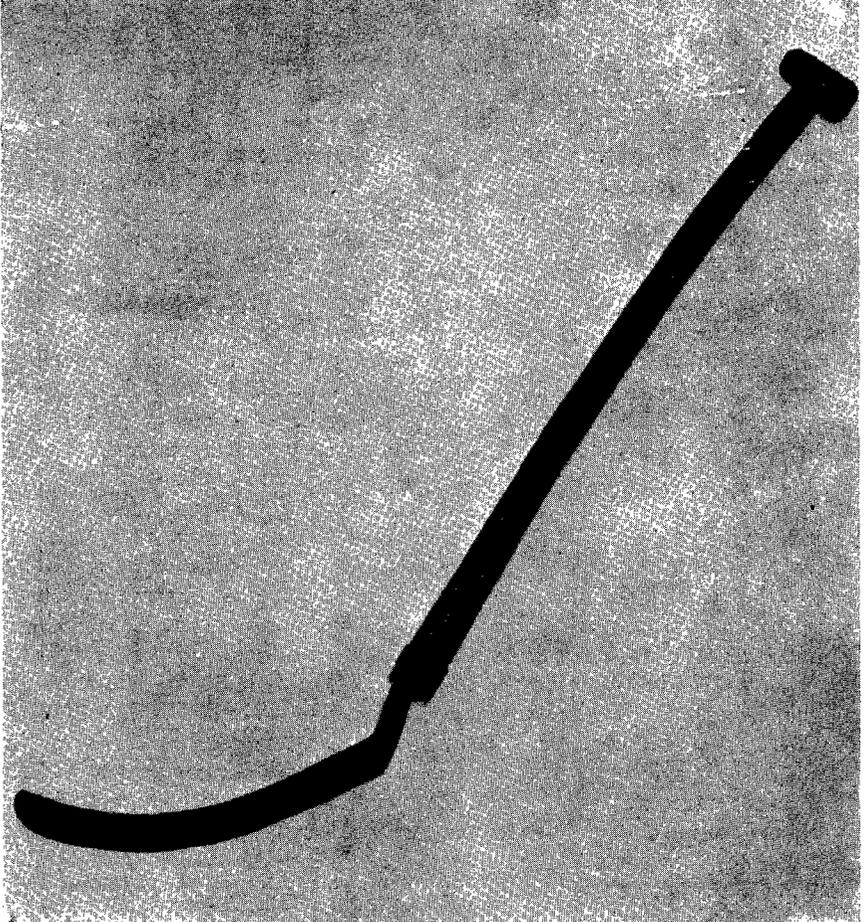
Peat is the accumulation of the refuse of forest growth. It occurs only in damp places, and sometimes, as in beds near Wenham Lake, the deposits are as much as fifteen feet in depth. More commonly the beds are from five to eleven feet thick. Near the surface the turf is lighter in weight and color and shows plainly its composition of roots, aquatic plants, and leaf mold. At a greater depth the deposit is more nearly solidified and is black in color. It is, in fact, on the way to becoming coal.

Reliable evidence about tools and methods of cutting has come down to us from a number of local sources. The earliest appears in *The Diary of William Bentley, D.D.* Bentley was the noted divine of Salem, keen observer of men

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the fourth article to have appeared in OLD-TIME NEW ENGLAND in the series which the author calls Middleton Papers.

and of practical affairs in the world about him. On June 19, 1800, he visited the farm of Jonathan Ingersoll in Danvers. "Upon this farm," he said, "I had the pleasure of seeing them cut peat from

which is delivered upon the knife into a square box, like the hod used by masons, only longer & taken in the arms. It is only within a few years that peat has been regarded. It is said as commonly used, when



TOPPING KNIFE

Courtesy of the Middleton Historical Society.

the Meadow. A Knife is first used to take off the sod, for 4 inches or more, & then a knife with a spade handle cutting two ways, & at right angles, takes up a square sided turf 5 inches wide & 20 inches long,

well cut to be almost as good as wood, at 7 to 8 a cord. But a use of it with grates considering how close it may be measured, it is said might be equal to the same measure of common wood."

A similar account was written by Charles J. Peabody of Topsfield whose reminiscences concerning his grandfather's time were published in 1921 in the *Topsfield Historical Collections*, Vol. xxvi. He speaks especially of the topping knife, saying, "As the peat was found in the meadow there would be a thick mass of grass roots which was removed with a tool called a 'topping knife,' a strong blade like a short scythe set in a handle at such an angle that the weight of the workman as well as his strength forced it into the ground." One of our elder citizens, Mr. G. Frank Evans, remembered this process and the tools, and I have found the expression "topping turf" in a diary kept in the 1860's by Solomon W. Weston, a Middleton farmer.* A common spade was also used for this purpose.

Mr. Peabody describes the peat cutter or spade as "an implement with a long straight handle that widens to about six inches towards the base, where it is faced with an iron cutting blade that has a cutting wing at right angles." In Ireland this tool is called a "slane." I have not found the term in use here. By New Englanders it was called a "turf spade." Four turf spades, large and small, were sold at an auction of the property of Asa Kenney, a Middleton blacksmith, on December 15, 1803. Kenney also possessed a turf hoe.

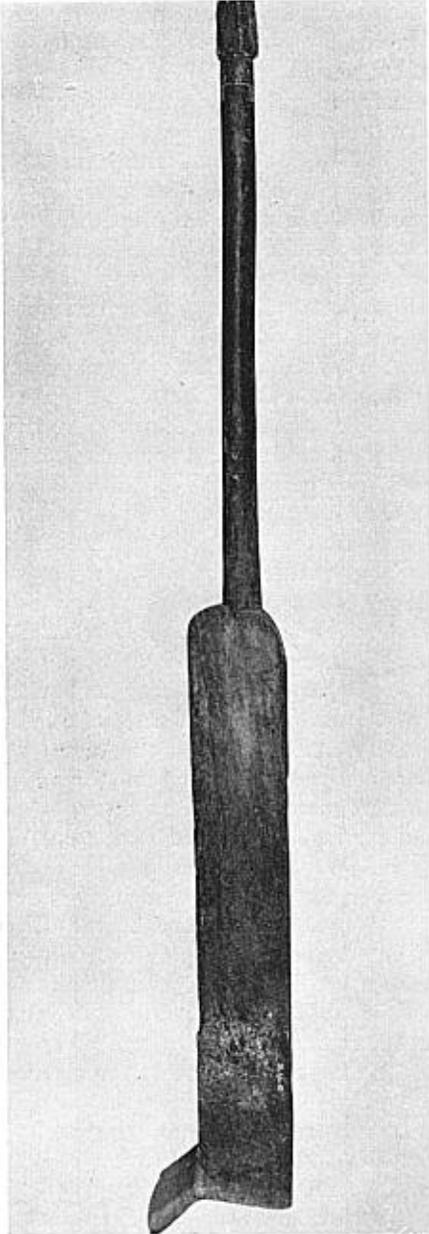
Examination of a number of peat-working tools shows that no two of them were exactly alike. They were made by the local blacksmiths, who, like all true artisans, turned out offhand creations unrestricted by mechanically precise limitations. Handles, which had to be renewed from time to time, also varied greatly. Another utensil was a peat fork with

widely separated tines, used perhaps for turning the blocks of peat during the drying period.

In cutting peat a trench or ditch was first made so that the turf could be reached from the sides and forced out. Cutting in this way was continued to a considerable depth, even when the trench became partially filled with water. However obtained, peat was always saturated with moisture and required several weeks of drying in the open air. It was first stacked near the trenches in such a manner as to allow the air to circulate between the blocks, and it was occasionally turned so that sun and air might reach it from all sides. George Francis Dow, in an article on the subject in *OLD-TIME NEW ENGLAND*, October 1930, says that the best time for cutting peat was between the middle of August and the middle of September. Turf cut earlier in the summer was likely to be dry and crumbly. This custom is partly confirmed by the Weston diary. In 1865 Weston cut turf on August 17 and 21, piled it on August 30, and got it in on August 31 and September 4. The following year, however, he began topping in June, cut his peat on July 9, and got it in on August 9.

After the fuel was thoroughly dried, it was stored in the "turf house." Turf sheds were built at the peat meadows and were numbered among the outbuildings of many Middleton farmers. The estate inventory of David Fuller, taken November 3, 1821, mentions "Peat meadow bought of Amos Thomas with a peat-house thereon—2 Acres and thirty poles," valued at \$110, and "a tract of Peat meadow containing one Acre, \$35." In a deed from David Richardson to Stephen Richardson dated March 26, 1818, a property near Middleton meetinghouse was described as "one and one-

* This diary is in the Essex Institute.



TURF CUTTER

Courtesy of the Middleton Historical Society.

quarter acres with a dwelling house and peat house thereon."

Although this fuel was undoubtedly dirty to handle and burned with a peculiar odor, there was a real necessity for its use during the War of 1812. This is made plain in a number of passages from Bentley's diary. Says he, on December 4, 1813: "The Embargo stopping the Coasters at present has made us apprehensive of a high price of wood. Wood from the Country, Oak, 8 D. sold this day. Wood at the wharf, 7.50. We have greater quantities of Turf in the market than have ever been seen. The Market seldom without it."

September 24, 1814, he reports: "The zeal to prevent suffering from the want of fuel from Maine has sent many of our Citizens to the Turf Meadows. Several parties have been at the Legg Hill grounds, at the Great Swamp & at the Lynn line meadows."

Three days later, in describing the Samuel Bradstreet farm in Topsfield, he writes: "As we proceeded by the pasture road towards the top of the hill in which the house stood, we saw on the Southwest many turf houses which had been erected formerly & were now again occupied in preparing that convenient article of fuel on the other side of the river."

In this connection, Mr. Dow has this to say: "The 'turf house' was a common sight in Essex County meadows a century ago. Beside the 'Valley Road' in Topsfield, bounded at one side by the 'Wenham Causeway,' there is a meadow of about a dozen acres, now much overgrown with bushes and young growth, where might be seen, barely seventy years ago [1880] more than a dozen disused 'turf houses,' slowly decaying and falling to the ground." He then remarks, "It is a curious fact that a peat excavation be-

comes filled up rapidly by a natural growth of vegetation and in thirty or forty years the surface appears much as before."

It is interesting to note that on the road from Topsfield to Wenham the business of cutting peat for gardens is still carried on.

The Reverend Bentley at a later time (July 9, 1816) refers once more to the war-time activities in getting peat. "We passed from the farm [Pickman's] through Marthebeque along the new ditch for the swamp made in the time of getting peat from the Meadows in the late war," etc.

Although the people of Salem were once more able to get a wood supply from Maine and New Hampshire, the Middleton farmers continued to use and sell peat. David Fuller, mentioned above, had on hand at the time of his death fourteen cords of peat, valued at two dollars a cord, besides four cords that had already been sold. In an indenture between Asa Eliot and Simeon Stiles, dated April 13, 1822, Eliot agreed to let a certain farm to Stiles on condition that among the things he was to do in payment was "to cut 16 cord of peat & dry the same & cart & put 8 cord into sd Asa Eliot's turf house." In many Middleton records we find mention of the loan of a horse and wagon to draw turf or of labor in cutting it. Instances could be multiplied. It was certainly a common feature of Middleton life in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Of its use in the home we know rather less, except that it was a substitute for wood and not for coal. Anthracite coal was not introduced into New England until 1828 and was unknown to the farmers before 1854. Peat was burned in iron grates, presumably in the fireplace. Theodore Ingalls, a well-to-do black-

smith, dying in 1817, left "turf tools," valued at three dollars, and a "peat grate," worth one dollar. We may assume that Ingalls made his own grate, and no doubt he supplied his customers with similar conveniences. David Fuller owned two iron grates of the same value. In view of his large supply of peat, we cannot doubt that they were intended for burning it. An earlier mention of a "turf grate" occurs in the inventory of the estate of Elijah Wilkins, victualler, of Middleton, in the year 1806.

According to Charles J. Peabody, there were tricks in burning peat that added to its effectiveness. He says: "The light peat was used to burn in the spring and fall and the hard or heavier quality was used in the winter to keep the fire through the night in the fireplace. I well remember being told how to fix the fire for that purpose. The ashes were pushed back, the coals allowed to kindle to a bright red, then a block of peat about four inches square and fifteen to eighteen inches long would be layed on the coals, a second piece placed on that, then the ashes piled around and over the top. It then was safe till morning. When raked open, the fire for the day was started with the help of the half-burned peat." The objection to its use was the odor, penetrating and peculiar.

This unpleasant fuel was evidently used in the Batchelder Tavern (the old Estey tavern) in Middleton Square. At least, Amos Batchelder in his account book, between 1842 and 1845 repeatedly credited Elbridge Stiles and Joseph Russell for quantities of turf furnished him, and he paid others as well for drawing turf. Once he even sold a few feet of it to Mrs. Moore, who lived across the road. It is apparent that peat was still in general use.

The fuel is mentioned as late as 1869

by Solomon Weston, but I have obtained an even later account from Mrs. Walter S. Flint of Beverly, who lived in Middleton as a child. Born in 1868, she remembers distinctly that her father cut peat in the meadow near their home on Essex Street, and that it was burned in the kitchen stove. The pieces used were the size of very large bricks. She thinks they

were cut from larger blocks. Mrs. Flint recalls that turf was disliked by her mother, because it was so extremely dirty and a brisk fire could never be made from it. It just "mulled along." This family must have been among the last to avail themselves of what was formerly a common fuel.