

Wilmington Powder House

Research by the Historical Commission, May 2022
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From Arthur T Bond Souvenir Book, 1904:

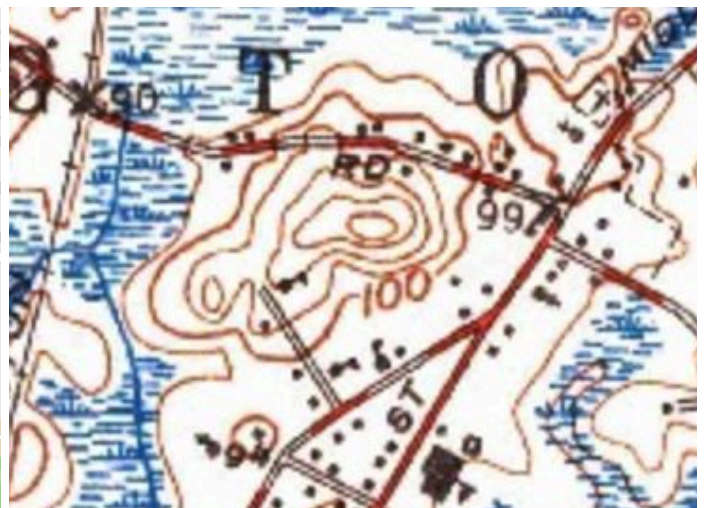
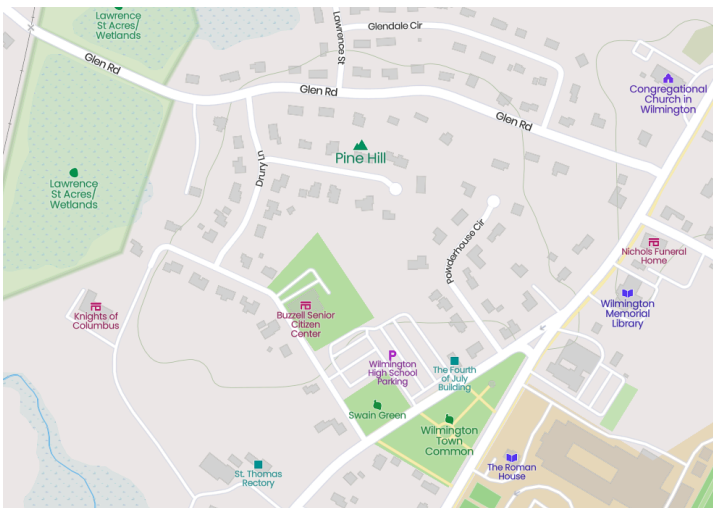
No. 7

Off Glen Road—a few rods through
“Pine Hill” woods, south from marker.

SITE OF OLD POWDER HOUSE, erected in 1814. A fine old hemlock spreads its branches over the site of this conventional structure. Gone fully 50 years, this old red powder house is well remembered by some of our older residents who, when boys and young men, made this “magazine” a rendezvous for sports and pastimes, *sub rosa*.

This brief tour-stop in Bond’s souvenir book raises the question, if it was built in 1814, and out of service by the mid 1850s, what would have been the context for a Powder House? Would it have anything to do with the Bond factories, with the location right in the midst of various Bond properties?

Location of Powder House Circle and Pine Hill



Powder House Circle is just to the northwest of the apex of the town common, and the end of the culdesac is at the bottom of a rocky hill, the highest feature in the center of town. Such features of prominence were often used for contemporary powder houses. The 1938 aerial map also shows a long shadow of a hemlock emanating from the hill.

Backstory to the Powder House

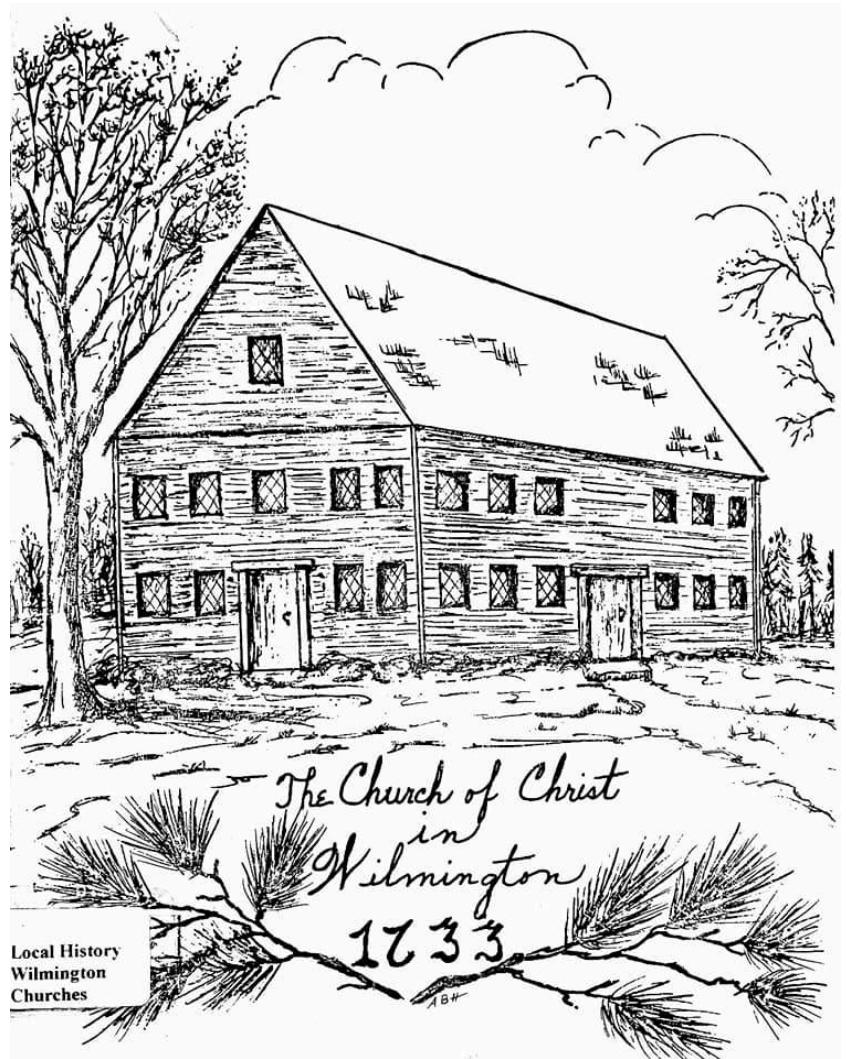
Towns often prohibited residents from storing large amounts of gunpowder, thereby necessitating a public powder house. Rev. Noyes historical address from 1880 describes the public powder supply being stored in the attic of the meetinghouse c. 1774.

A year later, March 7, 1774, we find a straw, indicating an ominous change in the outlook, and that everybody had begun to think of a resort to arms as not impossible. The town instructs the Selectmen "to examine the town's stock of powder and ball, and to buy more if they think proper."

I think it a somewhat grim fact, that this powder and ball were then stored in the meeting-house attic; which thus was not only a house of prayer, but also kept the powder dry. The incident is emblematic. Our fathers believed in "the sword of

In those days, the gunpowder was in the attic, not being "hidden", but rather "stored" as a matter of convenience. The first meetinghouse was built in 1731, and was unheated, and the beams and rafters were exposed from below (see the [church's history](#)). However, in 1764, just two years after the close of the second French and Indian War, the building was renovated. Changes included a 12 foot extension, the old diamond shaped window panes were "updated" to have square panes, and they refinished the inside with a plastered walls and ceiling. The unpainted exterior was upgraded to a cheerful light yellow. It is this refurbishment that we suppose initiated the centralized storage of powder and ball.

At the time, the meetinghouse was the only public building, and it was a practical place to keep the powder dry, and considered a viable long term storage solution back then. In reading about contemporary town storage approaches, Wilmington was not alone in using the meetinghouse (example: [Bolton](#)). However, when the town built the new church c. 1813, consistent with Bond's dating of the powder house at 1814, the use of the church for powder storage was discontinued. This may, in part, also be a transition driven by the fact that the first church was unheated, and there was a desire to install stoves for heating in the new building. In those



days, the lower level of the church had been used for civic meeting space, and for education, as it originally was a town-funded building.

The third church circa 1900. The second church (1813) was at the same location as the 1865 (current/third) church, but had burned coincident with the fires at the Bond Cracker factory when the steeple caught an ember, and being high and out of reach of bucket brigades, smoldered until the blaze was out of control. Many valuable furnishings were saved, though, since the flames, though inaccessible, spread relatively slowly.



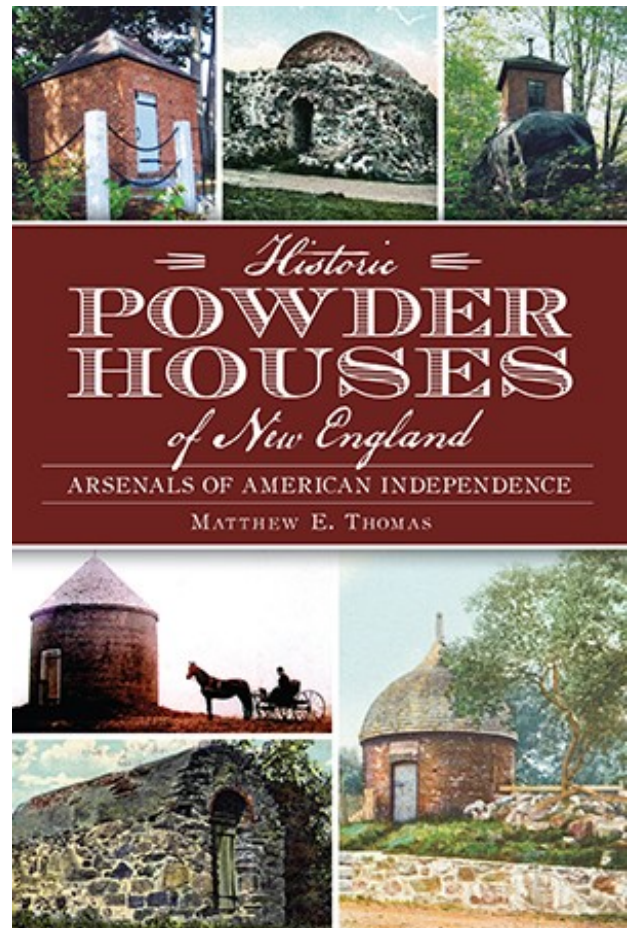
We know that Captain Joseph Bond was head of the local militia company about a dozen or so years prior (hence the rank title). Did he, having been in this position, have influence in having it built on or near his property? Was that just coincidental, as he owned much land in the center of town in proximity to the meetinghouse? Perhaps if that was the case, Arthur Bond might have made a familial connection to it in the blurb from the souvenir booklet. Perhaps the War of 1812, fresh on the minds of the townsfolk due to the proximal conflict on American soil, influenced a resurgence in the desire to having a locally stored and controlled cache of arms and powder.

Historical Context

The blurb noting Wilmington's powder house as a "conventional structure" and calling it "old red" indicates a brick structure. Powder houses were almost exclusively masonry (brick or stone). Arcadia Publishing has a book on historic powder houses of New England. Wilmington's was probably not more or less "historic" than these examples, but at very least, this book may provide insight into what the structure might have looked like and why it was built.

From *Arsenals of American Independence*, by Matthew Thomas:

"In many New England towns where a militia company was maintained, the supply of powder, ammunition and armaments was stored in a shelter designed for that purpose. Most of these powder houses were made of brick and were usually square or circular in shape. A few were constructed of granite, and a few others were made of wood. These powder houses were usually constructed on a stone floor or on rock outcroppings atop small hills that were often locally known as "Powder House Hill," Most square powder houses were capped with a hip roof, while circular powder houses like Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Haverhill and Newburyport, Massachusetts all



had conical roofs. Amesbury, Massachusetts had an unusual dome-styled roof. Eastport Maine, and Fairfield, Connecticut were unusual in that they were designed as long stone or brick archway-shaped structures.

“The powder house was often located with an eye to safety in most towns and to convenience in others. Those with an eye toward safety were usually constructed at some distance from the more settled sections of the community, such as Exeter, New Hampshire; and Ashburnham and Dedham, Massachusetts. Otherwise, powder houses were built near town commons or in a corner of a graveyard. Harvard, Massachusetts, was unusual in that it built a powder house quite close to the meetinghouse and town pound. Many New England communities also housed their stock of gunpowder and ammunition in the attics and cellars of meetinghouses, barns, and in one case, even a corn crib since there were no stoves or fireplaces in meetinghouses much before 1820. Sunday worshippers were known to flee meetinghouses during lightning storms in the event that lightning might strike the building and ignite the hidden supply of gunpowder.”

More reading on the Colonial Militia: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1983774>
<https://weaponsandwarfare.com/2020/06/17/american-colonial-militia-systems/>

The Revised Statutes of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Passed Nov 4, 1835

[General Statutes, Title IV, Chapter 12. “Of the Militia”, [reference](#), indicates first passed 1809, revised 1821]
In Chapter 12, Section 45:

“Sect 46. Every town shall constantly keep deposited, in suitable and convenient place therein, one hundred pounds of balls, each of the eighteenth part of a pound; one hundred and twenty eight flints, suitable for muskets; three copper, iron, or tin kettles, for every sixty four soldiers enrolled in said town, and same proportion of the aforesaid articles for a greater or less number.

“Whenever in the opinion of the commander in chief, it shall necessary, he shall issue his proclamation, requiring all towns to provide and deposite, in some suitable and convenient place therein, sixty four pounds of good powder, for every sixty four soldiers aforesaid, and in the same proportion for a greater or less number, and so to keep the same, until he shall by proclamation declare same no longer necessary; and each town shall forthwith provide deposite such quantity of powder, and keep the same deposited as is thereby required.

“ Any town which shall neglect to provide and keep deposited or any of the aforesaid articles as above required, shall forfeit the sum provided in the one hundred and sixth section.”

Column notes:

1. Musket balls, flints, kettles &c provided and stored by towns.
2. Powder to be provided and stored by towns, in case &c.
3. Penalty for neglect, \$106.

Wilmington Evidence

The 1829-1830 Annual Report shows that Ensign Walter Blanchard was paid by the town for powder, and William Blanchard III was paid by the town for making cartridges. Apparently the town found it necessary to have a supply of powder and cartridges and we presume the town was the caretaker of some small [gunpowder magazine](#) storing those items someplace. The report doesn't indicate if the powder house is publicly or privately owned. The report makes mention of other public buildings (poor house, meeting house, school) but not a powder house. Upon initial inspection, it doesn't appear that Pine Hill was town-owned in that time frame, but privately held.

INCIDENTAL EXPENSES.

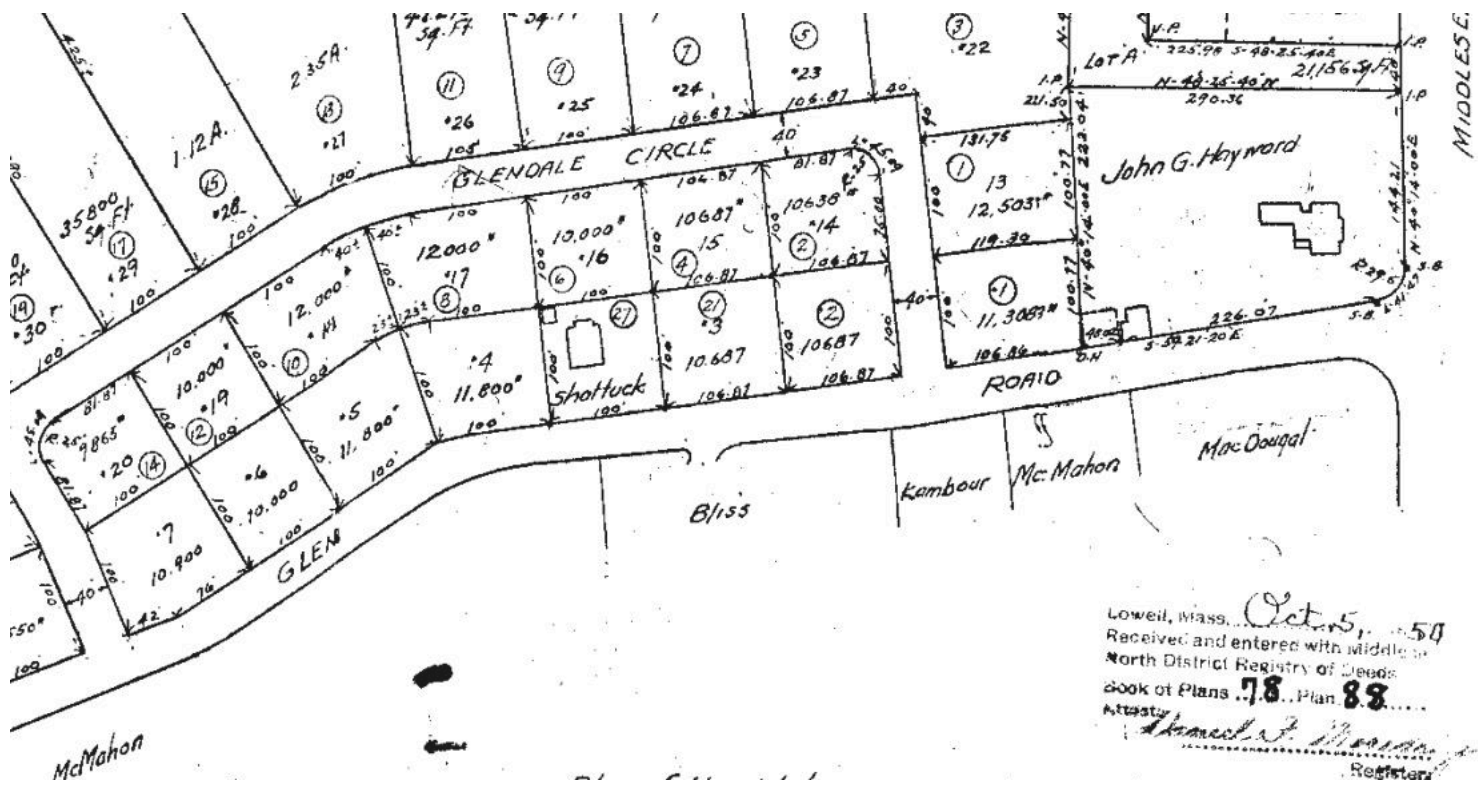
Paid to Eldad Carter, for Wood for the Meeting-house	5 70
" Ens. Walter Blanchard, for Powder	3 77
" William Blanchard 3d, for making Cartridges . .	2 00
" Town of Billerica, for Stone monuments	6 46
" James Jaques, Esq. for Guide-Boards	2 28
" Edward Beard, for work on School-house	1 08
" Do. for taking care of the Meeting-house	12 00
" Dea. Levi Parker, for Materials and Labour in re- pairing School-house	3 33
" Cadwallader Morrill, for setting up Guide Posts .	50
" James Jaques, Esq. for Glass for School-house .	60
	\$87 72

Typical powder houses of the day had the following characteristics:

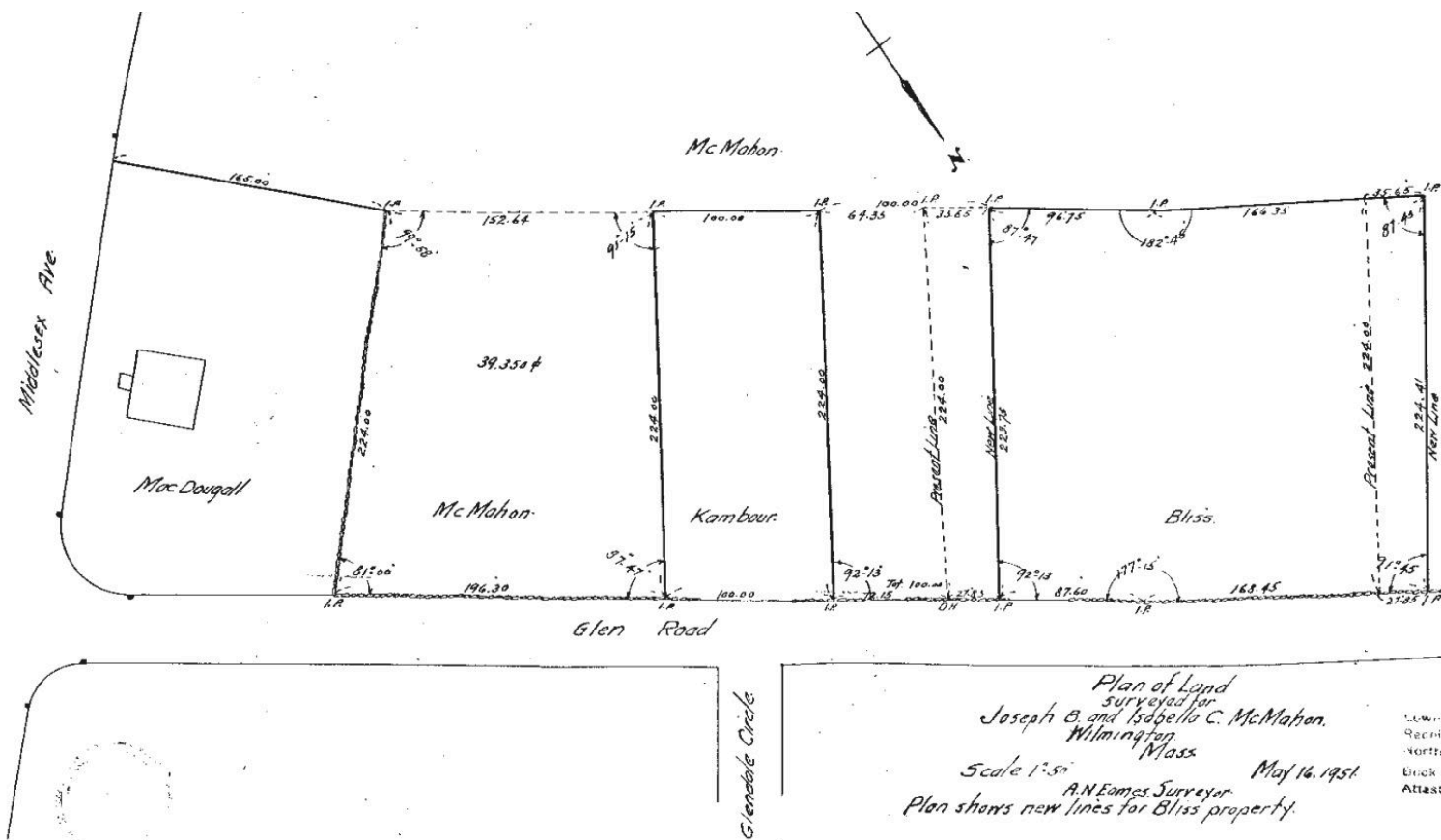
- Often, **somewhat removed** from other buildings and residences for the sake of safety. In the context of keeping powder among the other outbuildings at the Bond Factory, it wouldn't be prudent to place near other buildings, especially buildings with chimneys, fireplaces, ovens, kilns, blacksmith shops or any other source of sparks or flames. Separating the powder house from where other activities happen improves safety and reduces risk of accidental explosion.
- There seem to be at least some existing evidence that powder houses were **often built atop hills** or on elevated land. Some surviving examples in the area (Somerville, Dedham, Beverly) are all built on small hills or parcels of elevated land. It makes sense to have some indications that Wilmington's was built on or atop Pine Hill. These strategies also put the powder stores away from accidental flooding, ignition, destruction of property, as the high areas were used less for agricultural purposes.
- A **"secure" facility**, to protect people from themselves. Perhaps the town had an official policy that regulated bulk powder storage, speculating based upon the payments made in that annual report.

Town Crier 11/22/1962 includes a discussion of a Wilmington Militia company journal. Unfortunately, as the last line of the article indicates, there is no mention of the powder house as part of that journal. Larz does indicate that it was on the hill (presumably Pine Hill).

The actual location of the powder house is still under investigation through reading land transfer documents. The current thought is that it may have been perched atop the hill owned in the 1950s by Bliss or McMahon



1950 Plot Subdivision for Glendale Circle (Powder House perhaps on lot marked "Bliss" or "Kambour")



Pine Hill Ownership about 1950, Joseph B McMahon being key.

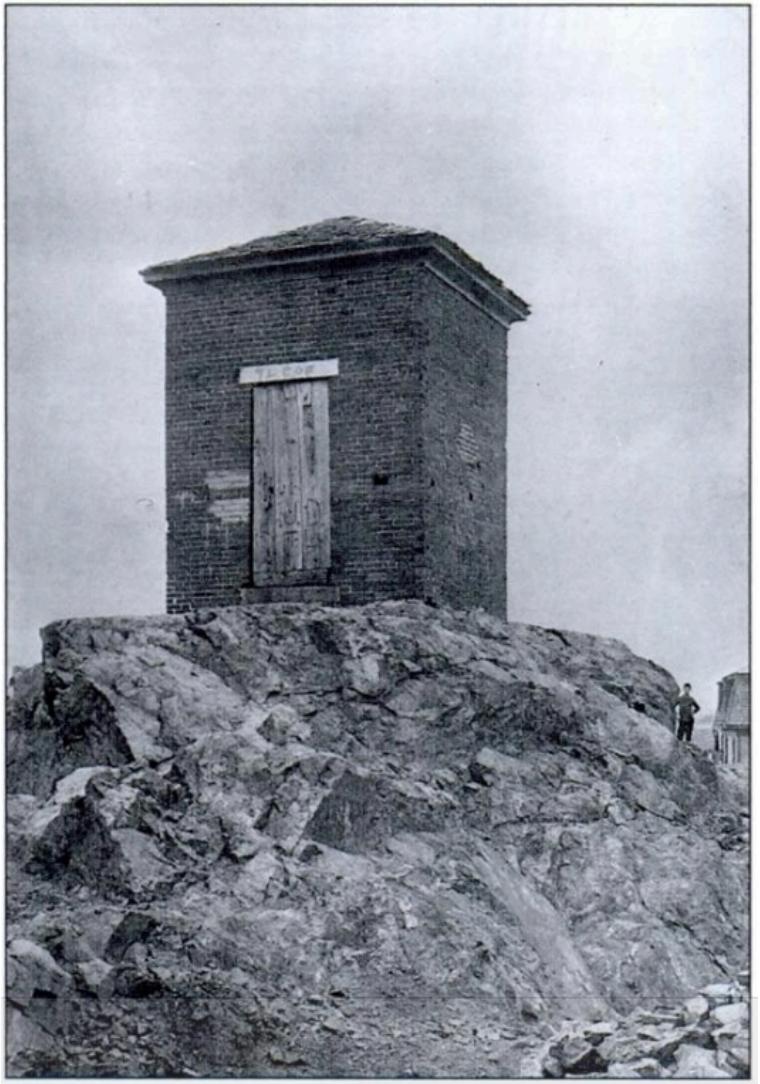
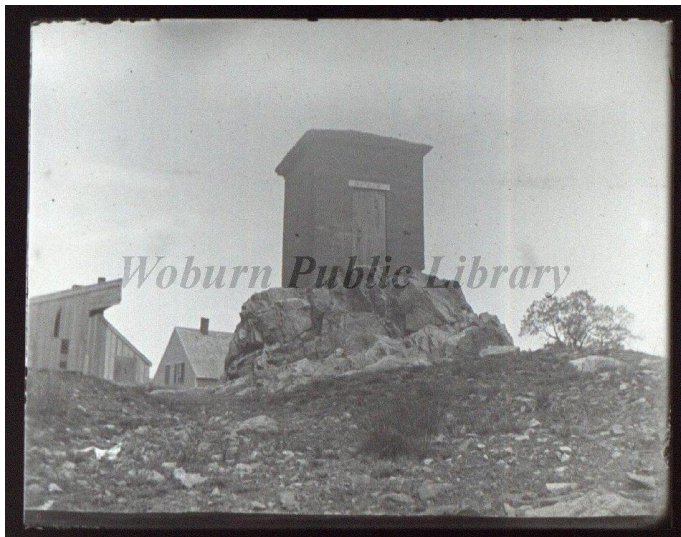
Review of Contemporary Powder Houses

A brief review of nearby town powder houses are included here, for convenience.

Woburn

From Kathleen O'Doherty's 2000 "Images of America: Woburn" book, "The Old Powder House was built on Bell Hill in 1812. The hill was so named after a bell was placed there to summon people to church and town meetings in the early years of the settlement. Because war with England was imminent, each town was required by law to store powder, muskets, musket balls, and camp kettles. Located off Mann's Court, the Old Powder House was demolished in 1898."

"The Statement of Expenses of the Town of Woburn for 1812-1813 was the first printed town report. It includes the expense involved in the construction and stocking of the Old Powder House, or magazine as it is called. Benjamin F. Baldwin was paid \$5 for his services as "committee for building the magazine.'"



Newburyport

Visit the [Newburyport Powder House](#), built 1822, as it opens as a historic park and learning center. The open house will feature a militia demonstration by the Acton Minutemen and guided tours of this unique historic landmark critical to our defense.



Dedham

The [Dedham](#) Powder House was constructed in 1766 for the town by a group of men including Captain David Fuller and Deacon Nathaniel Kingsbury. Made of brick and lime mortar, the small, sturdy structure measures eight feet square on the outside, and six feet high on the inside. The diminutive building stands on land owned by the local historical society, but the structure is owned by the Town of Dedham.



Beverly

[Beverly](#)'s first ammunition storage was in the cellar of their second church, 1727

The powder house was put into use for the first time on April 16, 1808



There were originally over 200 powder houses built throughout New England...of which only 54 still exist. Powder Houses also commonly called powder magazines and gun houses, played a very important role in the establishment and preservation of our American Independence during the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812.

North Attleboro

[This unique structure](#) was erected circa 1768 and was used for "keeping the town stock of ammunition." North Attleborough's Old Powder House saw service during the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. It is located on land that overlooks Mount Hope Street.



Exeter, NH

The Powder House was built in 1771. It is located at Powder House Point (previously Duck Point), and can be seen across the river from Swasey Parkway. On December 17, 1812, the State Legislature passed a resolution empowering the Governor to purchase a supply of powder, lead and flints for the use of the State. (The War of 1812) Half of this material was to be stored in Exeter, and the Governor was authorized to "procure some suitable magazines, or safe place of deposit - for the safe keeping of the public stores aforesaid".



Somerville

First built for use as a windmill by John Mallet in the early 1703 or 1704, the **Old Powder House** was sold to the colonial government of Massachusetts for use as a [gunpowder magazine](#) in 1747. It is the oldest stone building in Massachusetts. ocated at the intersection of Broadway and College Avenue in present-day [Powder House Square](#), the Old Powder House held the largest supply of gunpowder in the colony.

