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The Massachusetts Land Lottery Of 1786-87

William L. Welch

At the end of the Revolution with its treasury empty and its war debts due, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts found itself in serious financial straits. To ease the problem, in 1786-87 the new state conducted a gigantic lottery to dispose of some fifty townships from its vast public land holdings in Maine. In addition to revenue, legislators hoped to populate the area with a prosperous citizenry. Though it proved largely unsuccessful, the commonwealth's Land Lottery of 1786-87 was nonetheless important in the evolution of public land policy in Massachusetts in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The Massachusetts-Maine connection was ancient in the 1780s, having been formalized by the charter of William and Mary in 1691. Prior to the Revolution, the Bay Colony made numerous grants to Maine territory, but when the war ended the new state still retained some seventeen million acres of land in the District.¹ Massachusetts faced a staggering debt and an empty treasury, with its credit bankrupt, and its commerce destroyed, its people weighted down with taxes, and the government barely able to discharge ordinary expenses. It is not surprising, therefore, that Massachusetts saw land sales in Maine as an attractive source of revenue. In 1783 Governor John Hancock urged this expedient on the General Court, and the legislators quickly responded. That same year they created a land office, and in 1784 they ordered a survey made of the territory between the Penobscot and Schoodic (St. Croix) rivers.² In 1785 and 1786 the commonwealth sold some one hundred thousand acres of Eastern lands, but sales moved too slowly for the revenue-hungry lawmakers.³ In late 1786, apparently hoping to stimulate the gambling instincts of their constituents, legislators fell upon a new device—the establishment of a great public land lottery.⁴

Though a new means to promote public land sales, the lottery concept was hardly novel in Massachusetts in the 1780s. During much of the eighteenth century the legislature had routinely authorized lotteries to support various charitable, educational, political, and even military projects. Between 1744 and 1765 the General Court approved twenty-two lotteries—fourteen to aid local public works projects, three to help meet government expenses engendered by the French and Indian wars, one to write the final chapter on the land bank, two to repair fire damage to Faneuil Hall, one to expand student housing at Harvard, and one to aid in the re-establishment of a manufacturing firm.⁵ During the Revolution, the new state conducted or approved lotteries for both military and

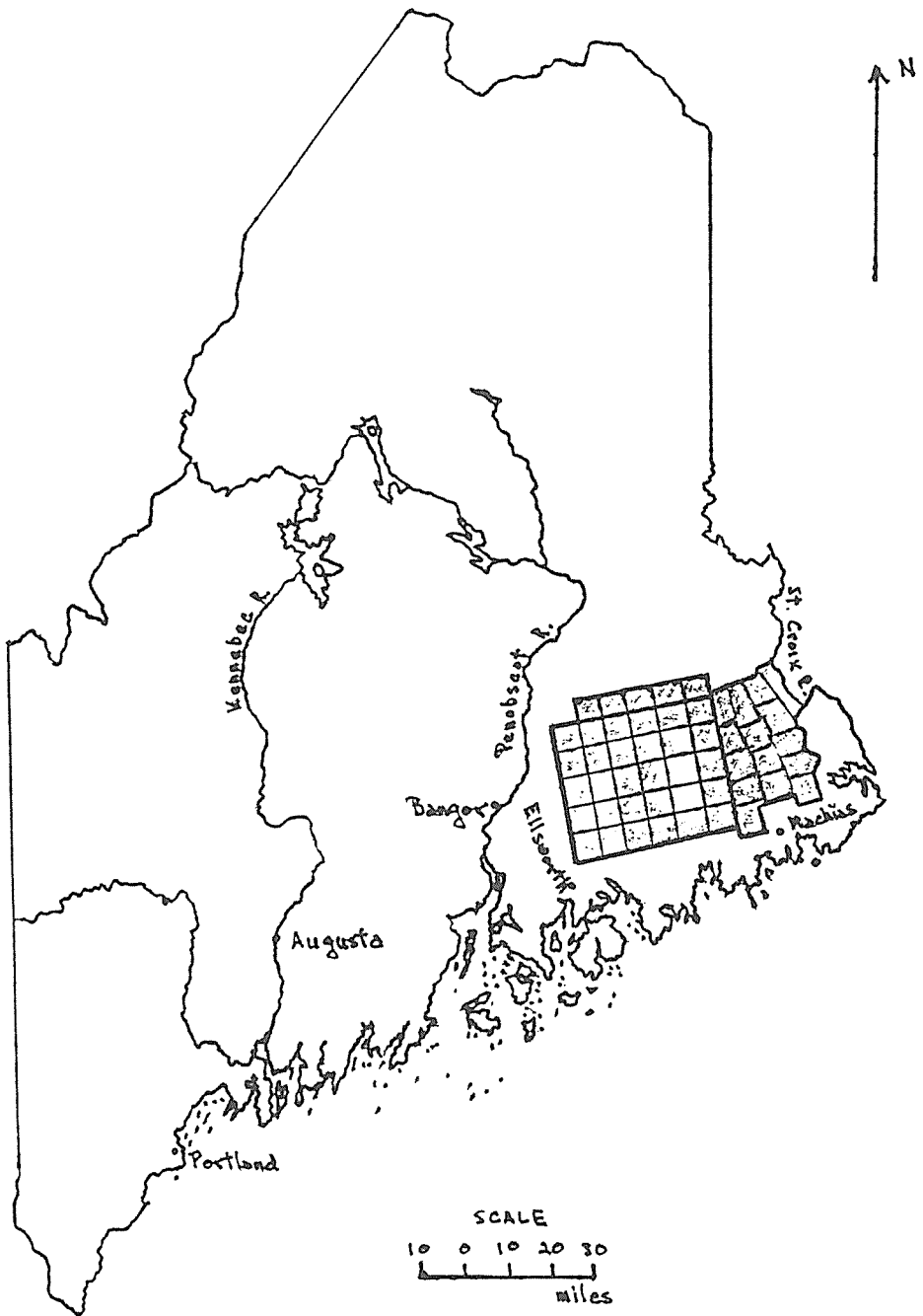
civilian purposes—in the former case to reward enlistments and clothe Massachusetts' part of the continental army, and in the latter to support local public works projects.⁶ Similarly, in the period from 1782 to 1785 the commonwealth authorized eleven drawings—seven to support local construction projects, three in favor of an equal number of manufactories, and one to aid a fledgling academy.⁷ While contemplating the disposal of Maine lands, lawmakers of 1786 were trying a new venture by employing commonplace techniques of the past.

Legislation creating the Massachusetts Land Lottery in November 1786 was described as an act to bring into the public treasury the sum of £163,200 (\$544,000) in government securities “by a speedy sale of part of the Eastern lands . . . [whereby] . . . the debt of the Commonwealth may be reduced; the burden of necessary taxes diminished, and the settlement and improvement of the vacant lands greatly promoted.”⁸ The law provided for the disposal of fifty townships, each six miles square, in the District of Maine between the Penobscot and Schoodic (St. Croix) rivers.⁹ At a cost of £60 (\$200) apiece, 2,720 raffle tickets were to be sold attached to an equal number of prize lots within the Lottery Lands. Thus, so-called “adventurers” enjoyed success from the beginning—everyone had to win something in the Land Lottery, from an entire township down to a 160 acre plot. Indeed, the list of prizes joined to the lottery act was impressive:

1	Township.		21,760 acres.
2	½ Townships.	Each	10,880 acres.
4	¼ Townships.	Each	5,440 acres.
6	3 mile x 2 mile tracts.	Each	3,840 acres.
20	2 mile x 2 mile tracts.	Each	2,560 acres.
40	3 mile x 1 mile tracts.	Each	1,920 acres.
120	2 mile x 1 mile tracts.	Each	1,280 acres.
400	1 mile square tracts.	Each	640 acres.
761	1 mile x ½ mile tracts.	Each	320 acres.
1366	½ mile square tracts.	Each	160 acres.
2720	prize lots		1,088,000 acres.

Only one minor restriction impeded the functioning of the Massachusetts Land Lottery—in typical New England fashion four lots of 320 acres each per township were reserved for public purposes and not included in the lottery—one for the support of a grammar school, one for the use of the ministry, and another for the first settled minister, and one for the general benefit of local education.¹⁰

Appointed managers of the Land Lottery with strict accountability for their performance were Samuel Phillips, Nathaniel Wells, John Brooks, Leonard Jarvis, and Rufus Putnam.¹¹ As a board they were to have lottery tickets printed on “good paper,” numbered, and checked; they were also to keep an account book and record therein township and lot numbers as mentioned in the lottery law. They were similarly to publicize the “scheme” of the lottery in the public prints in order “to promote a speedy sale of tickets.” The drawing of prizes was to take place in Boston on the first Wednesday in March 1787, and even earlier if all lottery tickets had been sold. Tickets left unsold in March were to be



Modern Map of Maine with shaded area showing the Location of the Lottery Lands.

surrendered to the state treasurer with a list of numbers; all money and securities received from the sale of tickets were to be paid to the same official by the lottery board as it was received. When the lottery had been drawn, the board was to publish in the newspapers a list of numbers with the corresponding prizes won and enter the same information in its account book. The managers were then to sign, seal, and surrender to the secretary of the commonwealth all lottery materials. Ticketholders had to come to the secretary's office within six months after the drawing to have their winnings registered. The secretary was to write the winner's name, place of residence, and "addition" against the lot number and ticket number in the lottery account book, and was also to certify the amount of the prize on the back of each ticket and return it to the winner. Such documentation constituted full title for the winner and was sufficient proof of ownership without any further deed from the commonwealth.¹²

Under the law, lottery tickets were to be sold for the "consolidated notes" of the commonwealth, or for the public securities of the United States called "final Settlements," or "for any other public securities on interest of the United States, or of the Commonwealth, or for gold and silver." To further encourage the purchase of tickets, lands won in the lottery were exempt from all state and continental taxes for a period of fifteen years. In addition, poll taxes both state and national on those persons who actually took up residence on their winnings were similarly eliminated for the same fifteen year period. Finally, the law provided stiff penalties for anyone who should "forge, counterfeit, or alter" tickets or other public records associated with the lottery. If convicted before the supreme judicial court, such an individual was to be fined not more than £1,000, or imprisoned for not longer than twelve months, or sentenced to be publicly whipped, not exceeding thirty-nine stripes,

or to set [sic] on the Gallows with a rope about his neck, for the space of one hour; or be branded, or sentenced to hard labor . . . or to suffer all or any of the said punishments, according to the discretion of the Justices, and the nature and aggravation of the offence.¹³

With townships designated and surveyed, and tickets printed, the Massachusetts Land Lottery got under way almost immediately upon passage of its enabling legislation.¹⁴ The lottery board made arrangements for distributing tickets for sale throughout the commonwealth, and advertisements appeared in Boston and Worcester newspapers.¹⁵ Government propaganda extolling the virtues of the Lottery Lands was particularly intense in Boston's *Independent Chronicle*. The soil of eastern Maine is "very good," ran a *Chronicle* ad, "and the Country well watered."

As the Cobscook, Denney's, Machias, East and West-Rivers, Chandler's, Indian-River, Pleasant-River, Narroguagus, Taunton, Skillings and Union Rivers, have their Sources within [the Lottery] Tract, as well as several Branches of the Penobscot, many of those Rivers afford good Mill-Seats, with the Advantage of rafting Logs, to them for many Miles. Sixteen of the Townships are from three to ten Miles distance only from Navigation, and the most remote is but forty Miles . . . Twelve Hundred Families are already settled in [the Eastern] Country, and more are continually joining them . . .

COMMONWEALTH of MASSACHUSETTS.

No. ~~606~~ Land-Lottery.

THIS Ticket entitles the Bearer to the Lot or
of Land, drawn by the Number thereof, pursuant to an
Act of the General Court, passed the Ninth Day of November
1786.

J. Brooks
Secy. Jarvis

Managers
W. D. Hall

[Vertical handwritten notes on the right side of the ticket, including names and dates.]

SECRETARY'S-OFFICE, No 13th 1787

THIS certifies, that Lot, Number ~~606~~ in
Township Number ~~Number East~~
Division, containing ~~five thousand four hundred forty~~
Acres, was drawn by the within Ticket, No. ~~606~~ and that
~~Ab. William Dall~~ of ~~Porters Merchant~~
is Owner thereof, as appears by the Records in this Office.

John Secoy, Secretary.

A Land Lottery Ticket (Massachusetts Archives)

As the Chance is nearly equal that every Adventurer in this Lottery will obtain 320 Acres; that it is but about three to one that he will draw 640 Acres; and 14 to one that he will draw 1280 Acres, and upwards,—every Man who wishes to *avoid* the Payment of Taxes, and to *secure* to himself and his Children, a *certain*, and *perhaps a great Estate*, at a very small Expence, will immediately purchase a Ticket¹⁶

But times were difficult in the Bay State during the winter of 1787. Heavy taxes and the commonwealth's refusal to suspend bankruptcy actions in a bad postwar economy had goaded farmers in western Massachusetts into armed insurrection, Shays' Rebellion. As the government struggled to repress the revolt, few men had surplus capital to invest. The commonwealth's debtors barely survived, while many creditors preferred to subscribe to a military force to subdue the rebels. There was no rush to buy lottery tickets. In February of 1787, the General Court ordered the March drawing rescheduled for June, and also directed the lottery board to further publicize the raffle by causing "a sufficient number of Maps . . . to be struck off, and distributed for the information of those who are disposed to become adventurers in the lottery." A bill from a David Burns for printing 214 maps indicates that the managers complied with this order.¹⁷ The project moved slowly, and in June of 1787 the lottery board itself sought further postponement of the drawing, claiming that ticket returns and sales proceeds from parts of Maine were not in.¹⁸

When the Land Lottery was finally drawn on October 12, 1787, it is not surprising that results were disappointing. At that time only 437 tickets had been disposed of—including six tickets granted by the General Court to Robert and Alexander Barr of Portland "as a Reward for their Ingenuity . . . and publick Spirit" in developing machines "for carding, roping, and spinning Cotton, and Sheep's Wool."¹⁹ Total revenues to the commonwealth were a meagre £25,860 (\$86,200) for 165,280 acres sold. There were, of course, some major winners—merchant William Dall of Boston received the largest prize of 5,440 acres, or a quarter township, and with a number of tickets Harvard College drew 2,720 acres altogether in several townships. Remaining "adventurers" won prize lots of varying acreages scattered throughout the Lottery Tract.²⁰

But the commonwealth now faced serious problems. Scattered holdings, due to low ticket sales and multiple purchases of tickets by many "adventurers," posed a threat to future disposal in large parcels of state-owned land remaining in the Lottery Tract. To remedy the situation, the legislature passed a "swap law" in June of 1788, which enabled the winners to exchange prize lots for a single piece equal in size to the total of their holdings in one of five designated townships on the edge of the Lottery Lands. To effect the swap, groups of proprietors having prize land together equivalent to a township had to apply to the state for an exchange within six months, and turn in their tickets, properly endorsed to show compliance, for new deeds. Of course, the rights of ticket-holders who had drawn originally in the designated townships or those who had settled or made improvements there before passage of the act were protected, and new proprietors were on their own as regards lot selection and surveys in the "swap" lands.²¹ Some "winners" did take advantage of this legislation but

many did not, and twice, in 1789 and in 1790, the commonwealth extended time limits allowed for exchanges. As late as 1796, however, prize lots remained scattered throughout the Lottery Tract, further complicating state land sales.²²

In light of the commonwealth's experience with the Land Lottery, it is interesting to note the report of the lottery board on the subject. Strangely, the board termed the project a success and urged its continuance.²³ But the General Court was unimpressed, and never again in the history of the public land program in Massachusetts was the lottery repeated.

Why did the Massachusetts Land Lottery of 1786-87 fail? A committee of the Bay State legislature reviewing public land policy in the commonwealth in 1836 explained it this way:

The partial success of this project was a striking instance of the high moral feeling of the community in regard to lotteries, as gambling institutions; and this rebuke of the plan of sale . . . successfully prevented the renewal of a project, at once fascinating and demoralizing.²⁴

Obviously the 1836 committee was ignoring the prevalence and popularity of lotteries in eighteenth-century Massachusetts. More enlightening on the failure of the land raffle is a letter from a Samuel Tufts of Newburyport to the lottery managers in June of 1787. Returning twelve unsold tickets, Tufts wrote: "I have used my endeavours to sell them but could not—the present unsettled State of our publick Affairs and the uncertainty of drawing Soon, is made a plea by some for not buying."²⁵ What Tufts was saying was that the Land Lottery was a victim of its time. Designed to alleviate the public debt of the Bay State in the wake of the Revolution, the land raffle misfired in the social upheaval known as Shays' Rebellion. As high taxes and the bankruptcy laws of the commonwealth drove agrarian debtors into poverty and revolt, the number of people who could afford to buy lottery tickets was reduced. Even creditors grew more conservative as they harbored available resources. Thus, "wild lands" in Maine and too remote from population centers in the rest of Massachusetts were a poor investment for most men. The Land Lottery of 1786-87 was unsuccessful not because Bay Staters were "moral;" they simply lacked the wherewithal to "play the game."

Though a failure, the Massachusetts Land Lottery was nonetheless important in the evolution of public land policy in the commonwealth. Indeed, in some respects it acted as a departure point for the development of a new public land policy. Prior to 1786, the state had favored small sales to actual settlers and direct government participation in the growth of the Eastern country. On the other hand in an effort to gain greater revenues Massachusetts by the 1790s began to alienate large tracts to speculators such as William Bingham of Philadelphia. Unfortunately, Maine lands still moved slowly as the commonwealth unsuccessfully competed with the federal government in public land sales.

In order to pay its bills, the national government sold some eighteen million acres of its own public lands in the trans-Appalachian west between 1787 and

1820. Extending liberal credit terms to buyers, the United States realized about twenty-two million dollars in cash sales and an equivalent sum in pledged receipts, at the same time admitting seven new states to the Union. During the same period, Massachusetts alienated six million acres in state lands, which included a million acres in free grants made to veterans, educational and charitable institutions, and for industrial and commercial development. Without question, the availability of good lands in the West hampered state sales. So did the tendency of the commonwealth to impose settling duties on prospective buyers by requiring them to locate so many inhabitants per grant, and its periodic indulgence of squatters. In vain the Bay State tried to inhibit national land sales by attacking the government's credit system. When Maine separated from Massachusetts in 1820, the latter had earned \$896,281 in land receipts for an average return of twenty cents for every acre sold. It was poor compensation when compared to the expectations of the revolutionary period.²⁶

Under the act of separation of 1820, Massachusetts and Maine agreed to equally divide the unappropriated lands in the District. In the following years the Bay State continued to dispose of its portion of the public domain primarily to timber interests. When land receipts remained disappointing, the commonwealth ultimately decided to terminate its program. In 1853 it made final disposition of its public lands, some 1,201,328 acres, to the state of Maine for \$362,500. In the end Massachusetts received a little more than thirty cents an acre from the sale of its public domain.²⁷

What can be said about the commonwealth's public land program of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? Designed to reduce the state's debt at the end of the Revolution, its most notable feature was a great lottery held in 1786-87. While the lottery failed to produce much revenue, legislators continued to view the wild lands primarily as a source of revenue. Beginning with the 1790s, however, the national government became anxious to dispose of its own domain, and became a strong competitor of the commonwealth in public land sales. Possessed of a better product and employing superior marketing techniques, the federal government saw its land receipts soar while those of the Bay State stagnated. Had the state been willing to make free grants to actual settlers in the expectation of increased revenues as the Eastern country developed, its public land program might have succeeded. The failure to adopt such a policy meant low land sales for the commonwealth, a sparsely settled Maine, and the diversion of Yankee migration westward toward the fertile reaches of the Mississippi Valley.

NOTES

1. Frederick S. Allis, Jr. (ed.) *William Bingham's Maine Lands, 1790-1820, Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts XXXVI Collections* (Boston, 1954), 25. For a detailed discussion of land grants in Maine by various authorities before the Revolution, and their location, see Moses Greenleaf, *A Survey of the State of Maine* (Portland, 1829), 380-399, 402-418; and, *The Maine Bicentennial Atlas* (Portland, 1976), Plate Ten.
2. *Acts and Resolves of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1782-83* (Boston, 1890), 799-801, 895-97; *Acts and Resolves of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1784-85* (Boston, 1890), 256-58, 282-84; William D. Williamson, *The History of the State of Maine* (Hallowell, 1832), II, 506-07; Oscar Handlin and Mary F. Handlin, *Commonwealth, A Study of the Role of Government in the American Economy: Massachusetts, 1774-1861* (Cambridge, 1969, rev. ed.), 81-2; Allis (ed.) *Wm. Bingham's Maine Lands*, 25-6; Greenleaf, *A Survey of Maine*, 399-400; Lawrence D. Bridgham, "Maine Public Lands, 1781-1795. Claims, Trespassers, and Sales," Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University (1959), 34-49, passim.
3. *Report of the Committee for the Sale of Eastern Lands* (Boston, 1795), Table No. I.
4. *Acts and Resolves of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1786-87* (Boston, 1893), 97-102; and, Papers Relating to the Land Lottery, 1786-1791, Eastern Lands Collection, Box 16, Massachusetts Archives, State House, Boston, Massachusetts.
5. John S. Ezell, *Fortune's Merry Wheel: The Lottery in America* (Cambridge, 1960), 32-3, 36-7, 38-9, 42-3, 45, 47-8, 55-6; John Noble, "Harvard College Lotteries," *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts XXVII Transactions* (Boston, 1932), 162-166.
6. Ezell, *Fortune's Merry Wheel*, 64-68, passim.
7. Ezell, *Fortune's Merry Wheel*, 70-74, passim. See also John S. Ezell, "When Massachusetts Played the Lottery," *The New England Quarterly*, XXII (September, 1949), 316-328.
8. *Acts and Resolves of Massachusetts, 1786-87*, 97.
9. See *Acts and Resolves of Massachusetts, 1786-87*, 98-99.
10. *Acts and Resolves of Massachusetts, 1786-87*, 99.
11. Phillips, Wells, Brooks, and Jarvis were legislators, and members of the General Court's Committee on Eastern Lands, Phillips and Wells since 1783, and Brooks since 1785. Jarvis was appointed to the committee in 1786. Interestingly, John Brooks would later serve as governor of the Bay State at the time of Maine's separation from Massachusetts. Rufus Putnam, the fifth lottery manager and also a committee member, had been actively engaged surveying and exploring wild lands in Maine for the commonwealth since 1784. See Allis (ed.) *Wm. Bingham's Maine Lands*, 26-28n.; William-

- son, *History of Maine*, II, 531n.; *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, 1964), II, 79-81, and VIII, 284-85.
12. *Acts and Resolves of Massachusetts, 1786-87*, 99-102.
 13. *Acts and Resolves of Massachusetts, 1786-87*, 101-02; Allis (ed.) *Wm. Bingham's Maine Lands*, 27-8; Greenleaf, *A Survey of Maine*, 400, 418; Williamson, *History of Maine*, II, 530-31.
 14. A receipt indicating payment for surveying done is in Papers Relating to the Land Lottery, 1786-1791, Eastern Lands Collection, Box 16, Massachusetts Archives.
 15. Tickets were sold specifically at the land office in Boston and at board members' homes—at Phillips' home in Andover, Wells' in Wells, Brooks' in Medford, Putnam's in Rutland, and Jarvis' in Boston. See various receipts endorsed by individual lottery managers involving large blocks of tickets with dates beginning November 19, 1786 in Papers Relating to the Land Lottery, 1786-1791, Eastern Lands Collection, Box 16, Massachusetts Archives. Putnam was also generally active in ticket sales in Worcester and Hampshire counties. See Putnam to Jarvis, December 29, 1786, Item No. 27 in Letters, 1783-1792, Eastern Lands Collection, Box 17, Massachusetts Archives.
 16. See *Independent Chronicle* January 11, 1787-February 15, 1787. Also see an acknowledgment dated March 1, 1787 by the Managers of the Land Lottery of money owed Isaiah Thomas for "advertising [the] Scheme of Said Lotty . . . 6 weeks in the Worcester Magazine . . . [and] . . . publishing 3 advertisements respecting [the] drawing Said Lotty" Papers Relating to the Land Lottery, 1786-1791, Eastern Lands Collection, Box 16, Massachusetts Archives.
 17. *Acts and Resolves of Massachusetts, 1786-87*, 449-50, 517-18; Papers Relating to the Land Lottery, 1786-1791, Eastern Lands Collection, Box 16, Massachusetts Archives.
 18. *Acts and Resolves of Massachusetts, 1786-87*, 691-92; Papers Relating to the Land Lottery, 1786-1791, Eastern Lands Collection, Box 16, Massachusetts Archives. See especially Jarvis' letter of June 22, 1787 in Box 16.
 19. *Acts and Resolves of Massachusetts, 1786-87*, 498, 545-47; slip acknowledging receipt of 6 tickets signed by Robert and Alexander Barr and dated May 3, 1787 in Papers Relating to the Land Lottery, 1786-1791, Eastern Lands Collection, Box 16, Massachusetts Archives; John B. McMaster, *A History of the People of the United States from the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York, 1883), I, 297.
 20. The Record Book of the Lottery entitled "Lottery Lands, 1786" is in the Massachusetts Archives, Boston. See also Papers Relating to the Land Lottery, 1786-1791, Eastern Lands Collection, Box 16, Massachusetts Archives; Noble, "Harvard College Lotteries," 163 n.4; Ezell, *Fortune's Merry Wheel*, 75; Ezell, "When Massachusetts Played the Lottery," 328; Greenleaf, *A Survey of Maine*, 400, 419-24; and, Allis (ed.) *Wm. Bingham's Maine Lands*, 28.

21. *Acts and Resolves of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1788-89* (Boston, 1894), 27-28, 273-74.
22. Papers Relating to the Land Lottery, 1786-1791, Eastern Lands Collection, Box 16, Massachusetts Archives; Greenleaf, *A Survey of Maine*, 418, 424-25; *Acts and Resolves of Massachusetts, 1788-89*, 590, 650; Allis (ed.) *Wm. Bingham's Maine Lands*, 28-9, 96, 647-48; Bridgham, "Maine Public Lands, 1781-1795," 297-303.
23. See Lottery Managers' Report to the General Court in Papers Relating to the Land Lottery, 1786-1791, Eastern Lands Collection, Box 16, Massachusetts Archives.
24. *Report of the Committee Respecting the Eastern Lands*, Massachusetts Senate Document No. 4, 1836, 11.
25. Samuel Tufts to the Managers of the State Land Lottery, June 14, 1787 in Papers Relating to the Land Lottery, 1786-1791, Eastern Lands Collection, Box 16, Massachusetts Archives.
26. Roy M. Robbins, *Our Landed Heritage: The Public Domain, 1776-1936* (Princeton, 1942), 8-34; Payson J. Treat, *The National Land System, 1785-1820* (New York, 1910), Chapters 1-7, 14; A. M. Sakolski, *The Great American Land Bubble* (New York, 1932), 39, 239-240; Amelia C. Ford, "Colonial Precedents of Our National Land System As It Existed In 1800," *Bulletin of the University of Wisconsin*, No. 352 (Madison, 1910), 136, 137; Henry Tatter, "State and Federal Land Policy During the Confederation Period," *Agricultural History* IX (1935), 180, 184, 185, 186; [G. S. Hillard], *Memoir and Correspondence of Jeremiah Mason* (Cambridge, 1873), 220-221; Handlin and Handlin, *Commonwealth*, 80-86; Allis (ed.) *Wm. Bingham's Maine Lands*, 32-34; Massachusetts Senate Document No. 4, 1836, 11-13.
27. Greenleaf, *A Survey of Maine*, 430; Massachusetts House Document No. 302, 1859, 1-4, 12, 14; Massachusetts Senate Document No. 93, 1859, 2, 5, 6.