

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

ARLINGTON

Report Date: 1980

Associated Regional Report: Boston Area

Reconnaissance Survey Town Reports, produced for MHC's Statewide Reconnaissance Survey between 1979 and 1987, introduce the historical development of each of the Commonwealth's municipalities. Each report begins with an historic overview, a description of topography, and political boundaries. For the purposes of the survey, the historic period has been subdivided into seven periods: Contact (1500–1620), Plantation (1620–1675), Colonial (1675–1775), Federal (1775–1830), Early Industrial (1830–1870), Late Industrial (1870–1915), and Early Modern (1915–1940/55). Each report concludes with survey observations that evaluate the town's existing historic properties inventory and highlight significant historic buildings, settlement patterns, and present threats to these resources. A bibliography lists key secondary resources.

Town reports are designed for use together with a series of town maps that demarcate settlement patterns, transportation corridors and industrial sites for each historic period. These maps are in the form of color-coded, polyester overlays to the USGS topographic base map for each town on file and available for consultation at MHC. For further information on the organization and preparation of town reports, readers should contact MHC.

Users should keep in mind that these reports are now two decades or more old. The information they contain, including assessments of existing knowledge, planning recommendations, understanding of local development, and bibliographic references all date to the time they were written. In some cases, information on certain topics was not completed. No attempt has been made to update this information.

Electronic text was not available for digital capture, and as a result most of the reports have been scanned as PDF files. While all have been processed with optical character recognition, there will inevitably be some character recognition errors.

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MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

DATE: September 19, 1980

Community: Arlington

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Town occupies approximately 5½ square miles, split roughly in two by the bold escarpment which separates the Fells Upland district from the Boston Basin. This fault, which runs from Waltham to the coast at Swampscott is broken in Arlington only by the valley of the Mill River (formerly Vine Brook), which runs out of the Uplands from Lexington. Most of Arlington's available water power came from Mill River sites in the upland area. Two high prominences, Arlington Heights and Turkey Hill, mark the beginning of the Fells Upland and lie on either side of the river. The level plain to the southeast of the upland is predominantly glacial outwash. It is terminated on the east by the higher glacial detritus of Somerville and Cambridge, before which Alewife Brook (formerly Menotomy River and now the town's eastern boundary) runs north into the Mystic Lakes.

Though a small portion of land in the southwest corner of the town drains toward the Charles, most of the town lies within the watershed of the Mystic River which forms much of the town's northern boundary. Before the last ice age, the Mystic River itself flowed south probably roughly following the course of the Alewife Brook and Fresh Pond Parkways. The creation of the Mystic Lakes, which Arlington shares with both Medford and Winchester, was due both to glacial and man-made obstructions.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Originally part of Cambridge, called Menotomy. Original 1636 "8 Mile Line" survives as Warren Street. Western line established when Lexington formed (1712) and eastern boundary at Alewife Brook formed Menotomy Parish 1733. Established as town of West Cambridge 1807 with annex to Mystic River 1842. South portion set off as Belmont 1859 with name changed to Arlington 1867.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Intensely developed inner Boston suburb on primary western axis. Located at junction of highlands and Mystic Valley plain with documented Late Woodland sites along Alewife Brook and Spy Pond, an important native settlement area. Early expansion from Cambridge with 17th century mill sites along Mill Brook and farmsteads along Massachusetts Ave. Town center developed at route focus between Spy Pond and Mystic River by early 18th century. Several Colonial houses along main highways preserved due to association to Revolutionary War (Battle Road). Variety of industrial activity along Mill Brook and ice cutting at Spy Pond, although little surviving evidence. Wide range of 19th century houses types from worker's cottages along Mill Brook, to Victorian suburban examples along Mass. Ave and Pleasant St.

Extensive residential development with railroad and trolley links to Boston during late 19th and early 20th century: affluent single family on highlands, many with stucco and brick period details, and multiple family on lowlands including some Art Deco brick apartments. Commercial development along Mass. Ave. axis with variety of structures including early NeoClassic civic buildings at Arlington Center and 20th century retail blocks at Arlington Heights and East Arlington. Recreational parkways extend along Mystic River, Alewife Brook, and Spy Pond with several open areas preserved in Arlington Heights. Present activity somewhat stabilized by extensive residential areas, although strip development along Massachusetts Ave. continues to erode original historic fabric around town center.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Focus of regional trail routes between highlands of Boston Basin and Mystic valley at Arlington center. Primary east-west route between Charles and Concord rivers conjectured along Massachusetts Ave. from probable ford site at Alewife Brook across Metonomy Plain and up Mill Brook valley; former loop at Paul Revere Sts. and branch to Shawshine (Bow-Lowell St.). Primary north-south route between Charles and Mystic rivers was Pleasant St.. Junction at Arlington Center with Mystic St. crossing Mill Brook along Mystic Lakes (with former loop at Old Mystic St.) and Medford. Other conjectured trails include Appleton St. around Arlington Heights and possibly Forest St. around Turkey Hill. Local trails across Metonomy Plain from Spy Pond to Alewife Brook are also presumed without precise location.

B. Settlement Pattern:

Period sites are probable although none have been reported to date. Arlington Plain (Mystic River-Alewife Brook -Spy Pond) was an extremely concentrated area of native occupation; known as "Menotomy". Several late Woodland sites known along Alewife Brook and the west side of Spy Pond. Large villages as well as fishing stations.

C. Subsistence Patterns:

Arlington Plain was a prime area for agriculture. Access to seasonal fish runs in Mystic river and Alewife Brook; one known weir south of St. Paul's cemetery. Diversity of terrain, from Fresh Pond marshes to uplands in western part of town, made this a rich area for hunting and gathering.

D. Observations:

A major area of native occupation from Middle Archaic through Contact period. One of the few areas along the Mystic River suitable for extensive agriculture and settlement. Also close to the lithic source areas of Lynn/Melrose/Saugus. Tribal affiliation of occupants during Contact period not clear, probably Massachusetts.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1676)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails adopted as highways by mid 17th century including Massachusetts Ave., Pleasant, Mystic, and Medford Sts. Broadway presumed to be early highway to Charleston. Water St. laid to Cooke's mill before 1640.

B. Population:

Small, probably no more than 150 scattered throughout farming community west of Cambridge.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Establishment of Cooke's mill 1636 at Water St. along Mill Brook set pattern of settlement along Mass. Ave. Planting lots along Metonomy Plain during mid 17th century.

D. Economic Base:

Agriculture and grazing. Earliest mill established by George Cooke about 1636-7 on Mill Brook. Incorrectly said to have been the earliest mill in the Boston area.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1676-1776)

A. Transportation Routes:

Basic 17th century highway system remained intact with improvement of highland roads as Appleton and Forest Sts. and the extension of Hutchinson St. around Turkey Hill. Lake St. set out as division highway across Menotomy Plain 1703. Traditional focus of routes at town center, emphasized by Menotomy meeting house location. Massachusetts Ave. as principal east-west highway from Cambridge-Concord (Battle Road 1775).

B. Population:

An expansion of farm community, perhaps to 5-600 by 1765. Few specific figures available.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Continued expansion of mill privileges along Mill Brook through early 18th century with farmsteads along Massachusetts Ave. Two division grants enlarged town-Cambridge Rocks (Arlington Heights), 1689 and Spy Pond, 1703. School house built at Arlington center 1693. Location of Menotomy meeting house at Arlington center 1733 established town center along Mass. Ave. and Mill Brook axis with radial growth along Pleasant, Medford, and Mystic Sts.

D. Economic Base:

Primarily agriculture and grazing. Small mills on Mill Brook at Mill and Grove Streets.

E. Architecture

Residential:
Though very few houses of this period still survive, Arlington retained a considerable number of early houses well into the 19th century. These included some dating from the late period as well as a few high style Georgian examples in the center. The only late first period house surviving is the Fowle-Reed Wyman House (1706) at the extreme northern edge of town opposite the Mystic Lakes. The written record indicates that simple vernacular, gable-roofed houses predominated. One gambrel roofed cottage is recorded as were several hip roofed houses. One end chimney, half house may date as early as 1760.

Institutional:

The first municipal structure, a schoolhouse, was built in 1693.

Commercial:

Several early taverns, none of which survive, were located along Mass. Ave. Only one store is known to have been constructed, though other stores were undoubtedly incorporated in domestic structures.

Industrial:

Small-scale grist and saw mills established. The William Clark carriage shop with a gambrel roof, survives at 400-402 Mass. Ave.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1776-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Colonial highways remain with improvement of E/W Boston axis: Middlesex Turnpike (1810); Lowell-Westminster Sts.: and new alignments of Mass. Ave. and Mystic St.

B. Population:

Economic prosperity encouraged by Whittemore Card factory. Population reached 971 by earliest census in 1810, 1230 by 1830.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Continued development of Mass. Ave. axis around town center with industrial activity along Mill Brook.

D. Economic Base:

Early boost to local economy provided by Amos Whittemore's factory for manufacture of cotton and wool cards (1799-1812), based on Whittemore's invention of a card-making machine. Removal to New York in 1812, it was said, left the town destitute. Return by the inventor's sons, Gersham and Harry Whittemore in 1827 may have been influential in inducing other manufacturers--James Schouler from Lynn, Welch and Griffith from Boston--to locate here in the early years of the Early Industrial Period. Another period industry was developed by Abner Sterns, who, in his machine shop on Mill Brook, invented, built, and operated machines for splitting leather. One of the earliest water companies in the area was the Middlesex Aqueduct Co., founded in 1799 as William Whittemore and Co., though for the first 30 years it served only one family. By 1907, it still served only 24 families.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Houses of this period were typically center hall vernacular examples following the standard one room deep plan, with five bay facades and double interior rear wall chimneys. These survive in large numbers throughout the town with concentrations on early routes: they appear to have functioned as the period's modest house type well into the second quarter of the 18th century. At least one large, vernacular post-Colonial center hall, double pile house, with interior chimneys on the ridge survives. A number of Federal houses with low hip roofs and brick end walls were built in the period. The majority of these are vernacular examples, their detailing confined to simple sidelit entrances, but there is one surviving highstyle Federal house (Whittemore-Robbins, 1799). There are comparatively few Federal/Greek Revival traditional houses and few cottages.

Institutional:

The only known extant institutional building of this period is the Baptist Meetinghouse (1790), an unusual late example of the meetinghouse form--3 stories tall, 4 bays x 5 bays, with double interior chimneys on the ridge.

Other institutional structures built in the period include the 1st Parish Church (1804-1805), a Federal church with 2 stage belfry; the Middle District School (1801), a brick one room schoolhouse; and the Poorhouse (1817).

Commercial:

Federal and Federal/Greek Revival commercial structures were constructed along main routes with advent of turnpike economy, such as the Benjamin Locke Store (1816, a stagecoach stop), the Cooper Tavern (1826) and the Fowles Store. Bakery established in the Cotting House (Mass Ave.).

Industrial:

A number of mill buildings were constructed, among them Squire Whittemore's Card Factory (1799), Cutter Plane Factory (1807), and a leather splitting factory (1811); no known structures extant.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation routes:

Highway system remained from early 19th century. Branch railroad to Arlington-Lexington around Spy Pond and up Mill Brook Valley (1846) with original granite bridge at Central St. Summer St. extended from Mystic Ave. to Bow St. Early horse street railroad (1859) from Cambridge to Arlington Center along Massachusetts Ave., linked to Boston system.

B. Population:

A substantial population rise 1840-1850 occurred due to the annexation of a portion of Charlestown. Between 1850 and 1855, the rise was over 17%, reaching 2670 or nearly double the number 15 years before. Many were probably part of the first wave of Irish immigrants. By 1865, nearly 20% of Arlington's population were Irish immigrants.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Extension of steam and horse railroads linked Arlington Center and Mass. Ave. Mill Brook with Boston suburban development. Ice industry activity around Spy Pond and worker's district along Broadway-Warren Sts. and Summer St. with produce farms along Mass. Ave. axis.

D. Economic Base:

Arlington's industrial growth was greatest during this period, after the re-establishment of the Whittemore card factory in 1827. In 1832, James Schouler, a calico printer from Lynn bought a mill site on Mill Brook and set up a printworks which in 1845 produced over \$150,000 worth of goods. Also in 1832, two English saw manufacturers from Birmingham moved to Arlington from Boston and set up one of the earliest saw factories in the country. In the 1850's
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acquisition of the Southwell patent for grinding circular saws together with the booming California trade brought great prosperity to the firm.

The Woodbridge Spice Mill had already been in existence some time, but by 1845, three mills which ground dyewoods, drugs, and spices led all other industries producing over \$400,000 worth of goods annually. In 1863, Samuel Fowle established his Arlington Mills, and with it, a New England reputation for "Arlington Wheat Meal", one of the first proprietary breakfast foods (Mill Brook Valley Survey). The Advocate reported that Fowle was the first to think of making meal of wheat by crushing the entire grain (10/30/1885). After the 1850's logwood dye production was gradually replaced by aniline dyes, though Fowle's logwood mill did not close until 1896. Commercial ice harvests, first conducted on nearby Fresh Pond in the early 1830's, had begun on Spy Pond by 1837 when the first ice houses were erected here. Ice remained an important product throughout the century. By 1865, 65,000 tons were being cut and stored. But overshadowing the ice industry in importance was that of a major ice tool manufacturer. Abner Wyman, a local blacksmith, began making ice tools (as well as a popular line of manure forks) about 1831. In 1845, William T. Wood purchased the shop, and in the years following, built up a national reputation for ice harvesting equipment.

The arrival of the Schwamb family in 1847 established German wood-working in the town. Charles Schwamb's mills (1847) specializing in oval picture frames. His brother Theodore established in 1862 a factory to manufacture piano cases, which by the early 20th century had become one of the finest in the field.

Improved transportation in the meantime had established a rapidly expanding market garden industry, of which one of the more prominent members was Warren Rawson, a pioneer in the field. By 1865, there were 67 farms in Arlington and the value of products sent to market, \$176,700, was the highest of any town industry.

E. Architecture:

Residential:

Simple, well-detailed sidehall Greek Revival and center hall Italianate houses were built in substantial numbers in this period. There are few high style examples; Italianate houses tended to be more ambitious than Greek Revival examples. A fair number of double houses were interspersed along main routes and behind the town center. Clusters of Greek Revival/Italianate worker's cottages survive around industrial sites just north of Mass. Ave.

Institutional:

Many important municipal and institutional buildings were constructed in response to industrial and agricultural optimism, these including: the Italianate Town Hall (Melvin and Young, 1852); a brick Italianate firehouse; the Egyptian Revival Congregational Church (1844); and the Greek Revival/Italianate 1st Parish Church (1856) as well as two Greek Revival district schoolhouses (1838) and an Italianate High School (c. 1855).

Commercial:

No known structures extant, though several 1 and 2 story frame commercial structures recorded in early photographs; a 1 story Italianate railroad depot was built.

Industrial:

Though mills were constructed during the period, none were recorded and none are known extant.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Road and rail routes remain from mid-19th century with expansion of electric streetcar routes: along Mass. Ave. to Arlington Heights and Lexington; Broadway to Somerville; Medford St. to Medford; and Mystic Ave. to Winchester/Woburn. Focus of lines at Arlington center.

B. Population:

Between 1870 and 1900, the town more than doubled in size. Many were Irish farm workers. With the arrival of the street railway, the population again nearly doubled in the 15 years between 1900 and 1915, reaching 14,889 in the latter year. Ireland still accounted for over 44% of foreign immigration into the town.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Increasing suburbanization along Mass. Ave. axis with numerous subdivisions, including Arlington Heights (1873) with railroad depot and commercial center. Expansion of trolley routes created additional subdivisions around Arlington Center by early 20th century with multiple family housing on Pleasant St. and in Arlington Heights.

D. Economic Base:

By 1871, there was a chain of seven mill ponds along Mill Brook with eight major industrial establishments, including the mills of Charles and Theodore Schwamb, the Welch and Griffiths saw factory, William Wood's Ice Tool works, and Fowle's Arlington Mills.

By the end of the same decade, the water power was virtually worthless as the unanticipated result of the establishment of the Arlington Water Works near the head of the stream in 1872. Although the town paid out over \$100,000 in damages to mill owners, the town's chief industrial development thereafter occurred in market gardening. Warren Rawson, Jr., son of the pioneer, became a well known author and authority on market gardening. He was, the Advocate wrote in 1897, "conceded to be the most extensive market gardener in New England, if not the country." (Souvenir, p. 24). In addition he conceived the idea of growing vegetables by electric light and was the first to "surcharge the soil by electricity thereby helping nature to do its work." (Callahan, p. 45). The product value from his own farms in 1907 (in Arlington, Medford, and New Hampshire) was \$250,000.

Two major factories closed: Welch and Griffiths whose Boston office was destroyed by the 1872 fire, and Wood's ice tool plant, five years after its merger with Gifford and Brothers in 1905. Before it closed, the company had become one of the largest ice tool firms in the United States.

The Arlington Gas Light Co., founded in 1854, moved to its present location on Grove Street after the closing of the saw factory there in 1885. Its successor, Boston Gas, remains there to this day. In 1888, the town contracted with the Somerville Electric Co. for electric service. The Arlington Water Works, through poor design never a success, was abandoned in 1899 when the town joined the Metropolitan District, which six years later, built the Brattle Court Pumping Station.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Extensive subdivisions were plotted in Arlington Heights and East Arlington early in the 1870's, but there was little building before 1880. Highstyle, architect-designed Shingle, Queen Anne and Colonial Revival style houses of the 1880's and '90's predominate in the area just south of Mass. Ave. and west of Pleasant St, but very few Stick Style houses. There is a grouping of Queen Anne worker's cottages around Turkey Hill north of Mass. Ave., while elsewhere, conventional Queen Anne and Colonial Revival 2 families, dating c. 1900-1915, are dominant, filling in large tracts to either side of Mass. Ave. east of Spy Pond and along the main roads crossing Arlington Heights. Other forms of multiple unit housing, including the 3-decker ("The Florence", 204 Mass. Ave, 1895) and the rowhouse (1-10 Park Terrace, 1899, a Shingle Style row), appear only rarely.

Institutional:

Many of Arlington's institutional structures date from this period and include the Renaissance Revival Robbins-Whittemore Library (Cabot, Everett and Mead, 1892), the Georgian Revival Town Hall (R. Clipston Sturgis, 1912), several schools, the Romanesque Public Works Department, c. 1870. Dr. Ring's Sanitarium, a large, mansard Italianate house, c. 1870, once isolated from the town center, survives at Arlington Heights.

Commercial:

A number of the 2 and 3 story yellow brick Colonial Revival commercial blocks at the town center date from the turn of the century, with a few highstyle examples, such as the Fowles Block (1896, Renaissance Revival), surviving. In 1883, a Stick Style railroad depot was constructed; the Stick Style Arlington Coal and Lumber Company building is a rare survival.

Industrial:

Utilitarian industrial buildings such as the Schwamb Mill were constructed during the period. In addition, a few highstyle industrial buildings were completed (the Renaissance Revival Brattle Court Pumping Station, 1906, and the Edison Substation, 1911?).

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Rail and trolley routes remain intact, with abandonment of secondary trolley lines. Improvement of existing highways as autoroads: E/W Route 2A (Mass. Ave.-Summer St.), Route 3 (Mystic Ave.) and N/S Rt. 60 (Medford-Pleasant Sts.). New autohighways include Mystic Valley Parkway and Route 2; original bridges at Medford St. and over RR in E. Arlington (1934).

B. Population:

Rapid suburban expansion between 1915 and 1930. Population in 1930 is 2½ times that of 1915 with nearly 12,000 arriving in the period 1925-30. This rate was severely restricted by the Depression. In 1940, the population reached 40,000.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Continued expansion of residential subdivisions along Mass. Ave. with growth of secondary commercial centers at Arlington Heights and East Arlington. Strip commercial activity along Mass. Ave. Suburban subdivision of highlands around Menotomy Rocks--Arlington Heights and Mystic Valley with infill multiple family housing on Summer St. and along East Arlington, Broadway, and Lake St. resulting in nearly complete development of available land.

D. Economic Base:

Market gardening remained the town's principal industry but growing land values and the pressure of residential, suburban development forced many farms to close. As late as 1927, however, one farm had won a gold medal in a New England-wide competition. By 1940 the same farm had been sold for a subdivision.

The Metropolitan District continued to make improvements in the area water system. The Arlington Heights standpipe, one of the state's most outstanding Classical Revival engineering monuments, was constructed in 1921-24, Frederick F. Low, architect.

The Patterson Tea Bag Company, begun by the inventor of the machines which sealed bags by heat, was an early pioneer in bagging tea.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Very plain, Colonial Revival and stuccoed Craftsman two family houses form the bulk of the period's domestic architecture. More ambitious Tudor, Colonial Revival and Dutch Colonial single family houses of the 1920's appear in scattered locations at Arlington Heights and facing the Mystic Lakes. Very few bungalows. Along Mass. Ave, multi-story apartment blocks, including a few simple Art Deco examples, were constructed.

Institutional:

Highstyle examples include Georgian and Colonial Revival fire stations (G. F. Robinson; 1925, 1928) on Mass Ave.; also the modern Post Office at the town center.

Commercial:

A number of 1 story brick commercial blocks with molded concrete trim built along Mass. Ave. outside of town center and at corner locations in outlying neighborhoods. Theatre and early auto showrooms surviving on Mass Ave. just west of Alewife Brook.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

Inventory includes most of the architecturally significant properties in the town and identifies concentrations of important structures, residential, commercial, institutional and industrial. Potential district of workers' housing (mid-19th century) on Bacon Street (may be included in Mill Brook Valley); concentration of good highstyle Stick, Queen Anne houses on Appleton Street/Paul Revere Road (old Mass Ave).

Industrial: The town's Mill Brook Valley Survey appears to be unusually comprehensive, as far as industry is concerned. A master plan has been developed to protect much of the length of Mill Brook from further development, the first portion of which, Cooke's Hollow Conservation Area, was completed in the 1970s.

XII. SOURCES

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