

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

READING

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.

The activity that is the subject of the MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report has been financed in part with Federal funds from the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. However, the contents and opinions do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of the Interior. This program receives Federal financial assistance for identification and protection of historic properties. Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Age Discrimination Act of 1975, as amended, the U.S. Department of the Interior prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, disability or age in its federally assisted programs. If you believe you have been discriminated against in any program, activity or facility as described above, or if you desire further information please write to: Office of Equal Opportunity, National Park Service, 1849 C Street, N.W., Washington, D.C., 20240.



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MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

Date: November, 1980

Community: Reading

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Town occupies 9.8 square miles of three upland watersheds: those of the Ipswich, Mystic, and Saugus rivers. The Ipswich forms the town's northern boundary, and both it and the Aberjona, a Mystic tributary which has its source in Reading, provided limited waterpower. To the southeast, the low ground drains into Wakefield's Lake Quannapowit and reaches the sea via the Saugus River. Much of the northeastern portion of the town is occupied by large cedar swamps interrupted occasionally by areas of higher terrain. The village of Reading is on the higher ground closer to the foothills of the Middlesex Fells plateau of Stoneham to the south. The town's prominent peaks, Bear Hill (229 feet), Dobbins Hill, and Scotland Hill, are all drumlins in the south and southwest parts of the town.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Original Reading town grant in 1644, part of the Lynn division of 1639. Apparent survival of 17th century boundary along the Woburn/Reading line. Surrounding boundaries with Wilmington and Lynnfield established by mid-18th century. Became the Third Parish of Reading in 1769 with meeting house at Reading common. Other parishes split off as separate towns: South Reading (later Wakefield) 1812, and North Reading, 1853.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Suburban industrial town on northern axis of metropolitan Boston. Located at headwaters of Saugus, Mystic, and Ipswich rivers with network of regional native trails around highland swamps. Early area of English settlement, part of the mid-17th century Reading town grant. Outlying farmsteads on primary N/S highways; some notable Late First Period houses remain. Town center formation by mid-19th century at junction of regional roads with an agricultural economy. Several well-preserved Colonial period houses throughout town periphery, primarily of central chimney two-story plan. Location of Boston-Merrimac turnpike and railroad by mid-19th century focused development in original town center between meeting house common and rail depot along Main St. Some industrial craft production of boots and shoes, chairs. A surviving period organ factory. Affluent suburban development west along Woburn and Summer Streets with well-preserved examples of Greek Revival, Italianate, and Mansard styles. Workers district located east along Salem and John Streets; includes a Victorian octagon house and period fire station. Town center remained stable through late 19th century isolated brick business blocks and modest residential development on adjacent Highlands.

Summer Street -- Scotland Hill -- continued as status suburban neighborhood through early 20th century. Numerous examples of elaborate Historic Revival styles on Propsect St. and along Lowell St. Town center rebuilt in Neo-Colonial civic style, including landmark Federal Revival meeting house on original common. Commercial highway activity developed along Main St. axis during mid-20th century, some period gas stations remain. Outlying suburban residential expansion, largely in modest Craftsman and Historic styles with some unique examples of cobblestone Bungalows, Early Modern houses, and an unusual boat-home. Present patterns indicate stable suburban development, although impact of commercial activity from Route 128 along Main St. to town center has affected historic fabric.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transporation Routes:

Regional focus of routes between upper Mystic, Saugus, and Ipswich rivers. Conjectured trails appear to follow highground around wetlands. Several N/S routes (Brook-Ash-Pearl Street) through Reading center. Branch trails ran NW along Highland-Brancroft-Hartshorne-Grove, West St. across Aberjona River and Haverhill Street around Cedar Swamp. Connecting trails ran E/W along Franklin, Forest, Oak-Summer-Walnut Streets with primary cross route through Reading center (Woburn-Washington-Salem Streets).

B. Settlement Pattern:

No period sites known. Very few sites of any period presently reported from town. Sites are possible on well drained terraces along Ipswich and Aberjona rivers.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Upland hunting and gathering.

D. Observations:

Located in upland watershed area between Ipswich, Aberjona (Mystic), and Saugus drainage. Probably in upland resource area for various coastal groups rather than territory of any particular tribe.

V. FIRST PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transporation Routes:

Native trails from Reading (Wakefield), Woburn, Saugus, and Andover improved and expanded into local highways. Primary N/S roads included: Ash-Pearl, Haverhill, Grove, and West Streets; primary E/W roads were Woburn-Washington-Salem Streets.

B. Population:

Earliest settlement in Wakefield by 1639. Probably no more than a dozen families in what is now Reading by 1675.

C. Settlement Pattern:

An outlying district of Reading (Wakefield) established during mid-17th century with apparent focus of settlement at junction of regional highways around Ash-Salem Sts. (Reading Common). Precise pattern remains unclear. Farmsteads probable on main N/S roads as West, Pearl, and Haverhill Streets.

D. Economic Base:

Subsistence agriculture. Grist mill in Wakefield by 1644.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Modest expansion of existing roads, (Woburn-Salem and Malden-Andover highways) especially after meeting house built. Local improvement of South Street as E/W connector and County Street around Robbins Hill (still unpaved).

B. Population:

Few figures available. Said to be 63 voters in Reading, 1771; 55 houses.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Formation of Third Parish meeting house in 1770 sets focus of town center at Reading Common during mid-18th century with farmsteads along major radial highways of West, Grove, Pearl, and Haverhill Streets.

D. Economic Base:

Subsistence agriculture. Joseph Bancroft initiated boot and shoe industry by 1758, with "operations on a somewhat broader scale than the usual household manufacture" (Eaton, 1896). Earliest "mill," reputedly a sawpit near Summer and Main Streets. By 1690, John Eaton operated the "Slab City" mill behind 100 Grove Street on a branch of the Aberjona. For a short time, there was also a small tannery near this mill.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Reading retains an outstanding collection of early houses, with many well-detailed center chimney examples.

(The earliest, the Parker Tavern (1694), is an integral lean-to center chimney type.) Most of the houses probably date between 1735 and 1760, but one or two examples dating from the late First Period seem likely. The longitudinally disposed chimney, with flues arranged in a row rather than clustered, appears to have been retained well into the 18th century in Reading as a number of houses probably dating c. 1740, have such long, narrow chimneys. While few high-style examples are known and gambrel roofs are rare, most surviving Georgian houses incorporate either pediments or entablatures at the entrance and a few have pedimented roof dormers. A few center hall, rear wall and paired chimney houses may date before 1776, but in general, the center chimney plan predominated. One or two gambrel roofed cottages have survived.

Institutional; Commercial, and Industrial: Few mill sites are known and a few district schools were undoubtedly built, although none are recorded. At least one tavern operated in the town during the period, but the Parker Tavern (extant) did not function as such until the very end of the period.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Radical improvement of N/S roads between Boston-Merrimac. Andover turnpike 1806 (Main St. through Reading center) with local connector along Woburn Street to town common, and secondary N/S roads along Summer and High Sts.

B. Population:

Figures unavailable for this period. Combined population of three towns (Reading, Wakefield, and N. Reading) 1,802 by 1790. By 1830, population of two towns (Reading, N. Reading) 1,806.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Location of Andover turnpike through Reading town common by early 19th century reinforced existing civic and commercial focus around meeting house. A secondary settlement area along Woburn and West Sts. at Scotland Hill with continued expansion of agricultural activity along major N/S highways (Grove and Haverhill Streets).

D. Economic Base:

By 1800, shoemaking had become Reading's main industry, by the end of the period producing a product worth annually \$122,000 and employing 238 men and 150 women. A rival industry, the manufacture of chairs and cabinetware, developed

during this period, led by Ambrose Kingman and others. By 1832, 32 hands produced cabinetwork.

The high price of hats during the War of 1812 is said to have introduced Nathan Weston to their manufacture using pasteboard, shellac, gum, and a covering of cotton plush. When the plush faded, Weston substituted silk. Although Weston discontinued the manufacture of silk hats in 1819, his name remains associated with the invention of silk hats.

E. Architecture:

Residential: One outstanding highstyle, hip roofed end chimney Federal house survives (with its original terraced landscaping) on Haverhill Street; elsewhere, paired chimney houses, many with high quality entrance detailing, predominate, with rear wall chimney examples being somewhat less common. Even a few center chimney Federal houses were built. As was true for the Colonial period, Reading residents seem to have preferred substantial, well-detailed, but somewhat conservative forms, opting in many instances for essentially a Georgian, rather than Federal floorplan. Brick end wall houses are rare, as are cottages, although at least two gambrel roofed, paired chimney examples are known on West Street. A few double houses, including one particularly large example, were built.

Institutional: The meeting house, a Federal/Greek Revival structure with a two stage belfry, was built c. 1820, although the present building is a modern reproduction duplicating the original. Also constructed during the period were three other houses of worship, two academies and seven district schools (some of the schools may have been built prior to 1775); none of these are known extant, although fragments may survive. In 1811, a post office was established at the town center.

Commercial: Several taverns were in operation along the Andover Turnpike, at the northern edge of town and at the town center; only one of these is known to survive. In addition, small-scale, domestically-set stores undoubtedly operated at the town center.

Industrial: Mills established along Grove and Pearl Streets in the 18th century continued to operate during the period.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Continued improvement of N/S Boston-Merrimac axis with establishment of Boston and Maine Railroad (1844) through town center. Local road improvements from town common to Wilmington and Wakefield along Lowell and John Sts.

B. Population:

Slow growth until arrival of railroad in 1845. Population increased by 1,000 between 1840 and 1850, though little growth after that until 1870's. By end of the period, population had reached 2,644 (almost exactly what it had been in 1860). About 8% were foreign born, the largest single group of which were Irish (about 4%).

C. Settlement Pattern:

Opening of Boston railroad during mid-19th century shifted focus of activity to Woburn-Vine Sts. area west of Reading common. Affluent residential development along Summer St. Worker's district established along John-Salem Sts. east of meeting house.

D. Economic Base:

During this period cabinetwork as well as boot and shoe manufacturing led the manufacturing interests of the town. Both peaked about 1855. In that year, 13 cabinetwork mills produced \$205,000 worth of goods and employed 179. An offshoot of this work was clockmaking, begun by Frost and Pratt after 1832. At first they bought clocks of Burr & Chittenden in Lexington, inserting them in Reading-made cases. About 1856, some cabinetmakers added refrigerator construction to their product lines. Employment in shoemaking peaked in 1845, though as factory production advanced, shoe quantities continued to rise for another ten years. Introduction of the McKay machine made further inroads into small shop hand production.

Two years after the opening of the railroad in 1845, Samuel Pierce began manufacture of metallic organ pipes -- said to have been the first attempt at making the business a specialty. (The factory is still at its 1852 location.) Pierce was followed in 1851 by Thomas Appleton, who in 1809 had built the first U.S.-made organ in Boston with his brother-in-law. Appleton built organs for nearly every principal city in the U.S. before retiring in the 1860's.

Necktie manufacture was begun in 1866 by Damon, Temple, & Co., by 1869 employing 169 hands. The company was said to have been the first to make this line a specialty, operating outlet stores in Boston and Chicago.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Comparatively few well-developed Greek Revival houses were built in the period, the suburban side-hall Italianate, constructed from the mid-century on, was far more common. Clusters of Greek Revival houses, most of them simple sidehall examples, (some exhibiting Federal proportions and detailing) are found at the town center and on Salem, Woburn, and South Main Streets.

A group of well-preserved porticoed Greek Revival cottages are located on Hopkins Street at the southern edge of town. Only a few highstyle Italianate houses were built, but good clusters of asymmetrical villas and simpler center entrance suburban examples were built along Woburn, Prospect, and Salem Streets; many of these survive with their heavy molded trim. In general, cottages and more modest housing are located east of the center with more imposing highstyle construction to the west on the Highlands.

Institutional, Commercial, Industrial: Very few of these building types are known to survive although it was during those years that the town began to achieve some local prominence. An Italianate Lyceum Hall with belfry was constructed but does not survive; also built was a railroad depot with a covered shed. This was partially destroyed by fire in 1868, but portions may remain within the present Stick Style brick depot, built after the fire. At least one 3-story Greek Revival/Italianate commercial block is known as are a few simple 2-story Italianate blocks. A few small 3-story utilitarian frame factories may date as early as 1870.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL (1870-1915):

A. Transporation Routes:

Suburban street railway lines extended to Reading center by 1890's with trolley routes along: John St. from Wakefield, Salem St. from Saugus, West-Woburn and Prescott Sts from Woburn, Main St. from Stoneham, and Grove-High-Middlesex Sts. from Wilmington. Later extension of Main St. line to Andover-North Reading by 1905.

B. Population:

Relatively slow but fluctuating growth until brief streetcar revival in last 5 years of period. Population reached 6,805 by 1915. Of the 17% foreign-born population in 1905, Nova Scotia, Ireland, and English-speaking Canada were the leading nationalities represented.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Continued expansion of residential areas around town center with affluent suburban district along Summer-Woburn Sts., worker's area along John-Pleasant Sts. and intermediate neighborhood both on Reading Highlands (between depot and town common) and Ash St. Hill. Commercial core extended N/S along Main St. axis with industrial activity along railroad. Secondary suburban development along Lowell-High Sts., Salem, and West Sts. trolley lines from town center.

D. Economic Base:

The 1870's saw the arrival of two new industries. In 1874, Thomas Mayall began manufacture of rubberized fabrics based on his own laboratory work. The business became the Reading Rubber Mills, and with an 1880 competitor, Chauncey Rubber Co., made the town a pioneer in the manufacture of rubberized cloth.

The invention and patenting of the wire hair brush in 1876 by Clarence and John Howard established another of Reading's major industries. Other firms included the Ryder Organ factory established about 1883, and a relatively short-lived fireworks factory built by Edmund A. Hyde. C.I. Nesmith operated one of the largest poultry-breeding plants in New England on a site off Main Street, and one of the largest nurseries for fruit and ornamental trees had been established as early as 1854 by Jacob Manning.

After passage of the 1891 enabling legislation, Reading was one of the first towns to construct a municipal lighting plant, hiring mechanical and electrical engineers from the earlier Braintree station, as well as Reading architect, George E. Abbott.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Neighborhoods along Salem, John, South Main, and Woburn Sts. filled with simple Stick, Mansard, and Queen Anne style houses, double houses and worker's cottages to the east of the town center and more elaborate highstyle Second Empire, Queen Anne, Shingle Style and Colonial Revival houses to the west. Toward the end of the period, a few well-detailed Craftsman derived houses began to appear along Woburn and Prospect Sts; undoubtedly some of the houses in that more affluent section were architect designed. Immediately around the railroad depot, a few triple-deckers were built, probably c. 1895. Also constructed in the period was a unique linked octagon plan house on Pleasant Street, originally finished with board and batten siding.

Institutional: Two outstanding institutional structures survive at the town center: a brick fire station with a well-preserved Stick Style tower (1883) and a well-detailed Queen Anne/Shingle Style school on Prospect St. A few other Georgian and/or Colonial Revival schools, dating from the end of the period, are known to survive.

Commercial: Only one substantial brick 3-story Renaissance Revival commercial block survives at the town center although other simpler frame buildings undoubtedly constructed during the period are extant.

Industrial: A number of utilitarian, three and four story frame industrial buildings were constructed including the well-preserved Ryder Organ factory. Also constructed was a Chateau-esque standpipe with a conical roof with dormers.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Abandonment of local trolley routes to Reading center during 1920's and improvement of local highways into auto roads on primary N/S highway was Route 28 (Main St.); E/W route was Route 129 (Salem-Lowell Sts.). Both ran through town center by 1930's.

B. Population:

Fluctuating growth, but peak years between 1920 and 1935 when town grew on the average by 217 people a year. By 1940, population had reached 10,866.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Increased residential expansion from town center. Affluent neighborhood along Summer-Woburn Sts. with core on Prospect St. Hill, and modest suburban tract development along Lowell St. axis to Aberjona River. Commercial activity expanded along Main St. from town center with highway strip development at Franklin and Summer Sts. crossing. A secondary center at Salem-Haverhill Sts. at Rte. 128 junction.

D. Economic Base:

Reading's largest industry in this period was the Reading Rubber Mfg. Co., employing 175 hands in the manufacture of rubberized auto top material and raincoat fabrics. The Globe Technolian Co., founded in Boston in 1906, was responsible for important advances in hearing aids and other sound amplification devices.

By 1924, Reading had 15 manufacturing establishments, in which 546 were employed.

E. Architecture

Residential:

A number of well-detailed and highstyle craftsman-inspired Colonial Revival and Dutch Colonial houses were constructed along Propsect Street. At least one International style reinforced concrete and glass block house is known to have been constructed, but was not located; its presence in Reading demonstrates an unusual sophistication and awareness.

Sophistication is also suggested by the number of well-detailed Colonial Revival and cobbled basement bungalows which were built in Reading in the 'teens and '20's; bungalows being a comparatively rare form elsewhere in the Boston Basin region.

Institutional: Most of the Town's municipal structures date from this period and nearly all are brick Colonial and Georgian Revival structures. These include the Town Hall, Post Office, Library and junior and senior high schools, all probably built in the late 'teens and 1920's. In addition, one of the town's most prominent landmarks, the Old South Church, was reconstructed in an enlargement of its original design. At least one school building constructed in the period reveals the influence of the International style: this is the Pearl Street School (c. 1935), a utilitarian brick structure, unembellished save for an elegantly composed Moderne door with a broad jack arch and keystone motif in narrow gauged brick.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

The completed portion of Reading's ongoing survey adequately documents the town's 18th and early 19th century buildings. The remaining survey work should carefully note important industrial and modern buildings.

The only industrial building noted in the town's inventory was the Lincoln St. railroad depot. Other buildings and structures of significance include the wood-frame Pierce Organ Pipe Factory on Pierce Street, a chateausque stand-pipe (1891) on Auburn Street, the 1895 Reading Municipal Light & Power Station on Ash Street, and part of the complex of the Howard Metallic Brush Co. (Prescott St. near Lincoln St.). Further survey work should also identify surviving buildings relating to the shoe industry. Potential historic districts exist along Salem, Prospect, and Woburn, and South and Hopkins Streets (mid to late 19th to early 20th century highstyle residential; early 19th century vernacular).

XII. SOURCES

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