

# KnowHow #5

INFORMATION AND ASSISTANCE FROM THE MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION

## *User's Guide to Town Reports*

### **Introduction**

In 1979 the Massachusetts Historical Commission adopted *Cultural Resources in Massachusetts: A Model for Management* and with it a social science approach to the assessment and management of the Commonwealth's cultural resources. To accomplish this task and accumulate a uniform data base, the MHC began a reconnaissance level survey of Massachusetts 351 cities and towns. These were divided into eight broad regional study units. Three primary products resulted from this survey and are available to researchers: town reports, an accompanying map of each town, and a summary regional report on each study unit.

### **1. What is a town report?**

The town report introduces the historical development of each of the Commonwealth's municipalities. The 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). The report concludes with survey observations that evaluate the town's inventory and highlight significant structures, settlement patterns, and threats. A bibliography lists key secondary resources.

### **2. What topics are considered in town reports?**

Material within each chronological period has been organized into five topical sections: transportation, population, settlement, subsistence and economy, and architecture. "Transportation" delineates the significant networks and corridors of movement through the town. "Settlement" outlines the changing patterns of human occupancy and the distribution and internal organization of population and structures. "Population" describes patterns of growth and ethnicity, social institutions, and movements that reflect changing values. Subsistence and economy considers the gathering and processing of resources, and later the sources of employment, the structure of labor, and the distribution of capital in each community. Architecture describes the standing structures and, where known, earlier significant

buildings, emphasizing the changing form of building types subdivided into residential, institutional, commercial, industrial, and transportation categories.

### **3. How are town reports prepared?**

Reconnaissance level survey is a rapid process, with most town reports completed in one week. Town reports are designed to present the town's history in a concise manner and to convey general patterns of community development. Research is conducted by a survey team of three or four members selected for each of the eight study units. The surveyors bring individual skills in a variety of historical disciplines including archaeology, architecture, geography, and economics. The primary responsibility for periods and topics is divided among the researchers who conduct research independently, but come together to produce individual town reports as well as the summary regional report. Variations in the level of detail result from the nature of the sources but also represents an attempt to correct imbalances in the data base conveniently available to the MHC. Additional explanatory information is limited to areas unfamiliar to a primary audience of MHC staff and cultural resource consultants. Researchers more familiar with individual towns and regions may find unintentional errors in reports. Corrections and classifications are both welcomed and encouraged. Grammatical tense within these reports is intentionally chosen to distinguish between historic patterns (past tense) and contemporary survivals (present tense).

### **4. What resources are consulted in the preparation of town reports?**

The sources consulted for the town reports fall into three categories. The first consists of the files of the MHC, including the computerized inventory of archaeological sites, the town inventories of cultural resources, and National Register nomination files. These are supplemented by primary sources on the town and region, including historic maps, atlases, and views, and aggregate censuses of population, agriculture, manufacturing, commerce, and fishing. The topics considered and the level of specificity of these resources varies greatly from census to census. Town and county histories make up the last category, written primarily in the late 19th century and characterized by a variety of biases. Held visits

## **KnowHow #5**

are used to evaluate and supplement information gathered from these sources. By far the largest amount of data is available for the first three quarters of the 19th century, conveniently the pivotal historic period in most Massachusetts communities. All sources report data for the 20th century. A further discussion of methodology is available in the *State Reconnaissance Scope of Work* (1980).

### **5. How do the maps and regional reports fit in?**

The town reports are designed for use with maps augmented by overlays of historic information. Using a U.S.G.S. Topographical Quadrangle as a base map, mylar overlays have

been prepared illustrating transportation, settlement, and millsites for each period. A key to the colors and symbols used on these overlays is available for consultation at the Commission's offices. Completed regional reports will provide both a regional context for information presented in the town reports and a consideration of significant developmental themes for the region. The regional reports also contain further information on the region's prehistory and the management of its cultural resources. Regional reports are available for consultation at the MHC or may be downloaded from MHC's website.

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