

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

BELMONT

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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MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION

William Francis Galvin, Secretary of the Commonwealth

Chair, Massachusetts Historical Commission

220 Morrissey Blvd.

Boston, MA 02125

www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc

mhc@sec.state.ma.us / 617-727-8470

MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

DATE: September 1980

COMMUNITY: Belmont

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Town occupies approximately 4.6 square miles. The northern half of the town is occupied by Wellington, or Belmont Hill, the southward face of which marks the beginning of the Fells Upland district. A glacial prong of Meeting House Hill (just over the border in Watertown to the south) occupies much of the southern portion of the town. Between the two hilly regions runs a valley connecting Arlington and Medford with Waltham, and which, by the location there of the Fitchburg Railroad, became the town's commercial center. To the east is the broad plain of the Pliocene Mystic River, overlain in places with rich glacial clay deposits.

The town is located on the divide between the watersheds of the Charles and Mystic Rivers. Despite the prominence of Wellington Hill, however, the town has few waterpower sites. Beaver Brook, which runs out of the Uplands from Lexington where it has its source, forms the town's western boundary; two small mill ponds are located along it, before it turns west and joins the Charles at Waltham. Winn Brook flows off the east side of the highlands into Alewife Brook, a Mystic River tributary.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES:

Formed from original Cambridge and Watertown grants. Original 1636 '8 mile line' is still border with Waltham. Established as town of Belmont in 1859 south boundary with Watertown along Belmont Street, north boundary coincident with Route 2. Eastern line with Cambridge at Fresh Pond established 1891.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW:

Affluent residential community on western suburban corridor of Boston. Set astride Boston Basin highlands and lowlands of Mystic Valley with contact settlement at Pequussett, now Payson Reservoir, several sites around Fresh Pond and suspected area of Waverley Oaks on Beaver Brook. Early grants from Watertown around Payson Hill with original mid 17th century field roads and two apparent First Period houses preserved on Washington Street. Primary Colonial settlement along highland base of Pleasant Street with some surviving period houses including notable brick example. Remained agricultural settlement of Watertown and Cambridge through early 19th century until turnpike and railroad linked area to Boston, creating several large suburban estates. Incorporated as independent, suburban town before Civil War with residential subdivisions around railroad depots. Well preserved examples of picturesque Victorian style in Belmont Center and Waverley. Extensive market garden production through 19th century and brickyard industry on lowland plain, but little surviving evidence. Underwent rapid subdivision with trolley routes in early 20th century with multiple family housing in lowland section and single family houses on highground around Payson Hill. Range includes Revival styles with many brick period examples. Highlands were gradually developed as affluent estate district in 20th century with elaborate residential examples in conservative historic styles (with exception of modern houses on Snake Hill Rd) and institutional complex of McLean Hospital with substantial brick structures in array of NeoClassic designs set in picturesque landscape. By mid-20th century most of lowland area developed as residential district with commercial cores at Belmont Center around notable Victorian town hall and depot, Waverley with well preserved Moderne autoshowroom and Victorian firehouse, and Cushing Square with historic Revival

retail blocks. Present growth remains stable with extensive residential district and close proximity to Boston, although pressure of development is evident in town center and along main autoroutes.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Conjectured trails followed boundary between interior highlands and Mystic valley plains; E/W route along Belmont-Lexington Sts and N/S route along highland front (Pleasant St and Pequusett Plain). Local junction of these trails at Waverley Oaks-Beaver Brook along Trapelo Rd. Suspected route over highlands to Lexington-Shawshine appeared to follow axis of Mill-Winter Sts along Beaver Brook. Probable trail from Fresh Pond Charles River to Spy Pond-Mystic River apparently followed Grove-Blanchard-Brighton Sts around Little Pond.

B. Settlement Pattern:

No documented period sites although reputed occupation along Beaver Brook (Waverley Oaks) and on 'Pequuset' Hill (Payson Park Reservoir). Other prehistoric or unspecified sites south of Little Pond and west of Fresh Pond.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

A rich and diverse terrain for agriculture and hunting/gathering. Access to major seasonal fish runs in both Alewife Brook/Mystic and Charles systems.

D. Observations:

Part of the "Arlington Plain" area. While little specific information is available, appears to have been an important corridor between the Mystic and Charles River basins.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails adopted as local highway system. Watertown division roads of 1630's over Pequusett Plain survive in original form as N/S Common, School and Grove Sts, and E/W Washington St over Payson Hill to Fresh Pond.

B. Population:

Small population, probably no more than a dozen families.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Early area of Watertown farmstead on Payson Hill with axis along Washington-Commons Sts by 1640's. Mill on Beaver Brook (1662) located on original Watertown-Concord Highway (Mill St). Pleasant St was main axis between Watertown and Mystic-Medford with probable 17th century settlement.

D. Economic Base:

Subsistence agriculture. Fulling mill built by Thomas Agar, 1662 on Beaver Brook Mill Pond; later became corn or saw mill.

VI COLONIAL PERIOD (1676-1776)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highway network remained intact from 17th century with addition of Marsh-Prospect Sts over highlands between Spy Pond and Beaver Brook, and improvement of road around Fresh-Little Ponds (Brighton-Lake Sts).

B. Population:

Probably limited growth, related to small farms. No established center.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Area remained productive farmland on fertile plain below highlands with several homesteads on local highways around Payson Hill and Pleasant St. Basic agriculture pattern remained unchanged during 18th century with some expansion into highlands.

D. Economic Base:

Primarily agriculture and grazing. Grist and saw mills probably on Mill Brook.

E. Architecture:

Though Belmont has comparatively few early houses, these include at least one house (Grant-Chenery) thought to predate King Philip's War, as well as one other late First Period house (Abraham Hill, c. 1693). These two, like Belmont's other early houses, are simple vernacular center chimney houses.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1776-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Colonial highways remained as the local road system. Concord Turnpike (1807) running from E/W from Cambridge across Pequusett Plain and directly over highlands to Beaver Brook created road junction at Pleasant and Common Sts now Belmont Center.

B. Population:

Probably limited growth, related to agriculture pursuits and the opening of the Concord Turnpike.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Opening of Concord Turnpike created direct link with Cambridge and Boston and resulted in development of cross roads tavern at Belmont Center junction.

D. Economic Base:

Limited expansion of agriculture and grazing. Plympton Satinet Factory established on Duck Pond (burned in 1848). Kendall's grist mill built at site of 1662 fulling mill.

E. Architecture:

Very few Federal style houses were built in Belmont; the majority were vernacular,

center entrance structures with 5 bay facades, twin rear wall chimneys and little embellishment. A single, very plain, brick Federal double house, said to date 1785, exists but probably dates later, c.1800. Only one Federal/Greek Revival cottage, with rear wall chimneys, is known, though others may have existed. A single tavern, built of brick in 1799, is known to have stood at Wellington Hill.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Basic system survived from early 19th century with increasing orientation towards Boston-Cambridge. Mainline Fitchburg railroad extended from Fresh Pond to Watertown (1843) across plain and along highland front. Suburban depots at Belmont Center and Waverley, and an ice harvest branch to Little-Spy Ponds. Now abandoned without trace.

B. Population:

No figures available before 1860. Marked jump probably occurred after arrival of railroad in 1843. By 1860 population had reached 1,198, over 22% of whom were Irish immigrants.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Extension of Fitchburg mainline through area created railroad suburban subdivisions at Waverley-Lexington St and Mt Pleasant-Belmont Center in 1850's. Town center located at Belmont depot along Concord Ave.

D. Economic Base:

The establishment of Belmont as a town at this time was due entirely to the routing of the Fitchburg Railroad along the foot of Wellington Hill--a route in part already determined by the pre-existence of the ice railroads to Fresh and Spy Ponds in Cambridge and Arlington. But despite the commercial growth inspired by the railroad at Waverley and Wellington (later renamed Belmont Center), the town remained virtually entirely agricultural. An impetus given to the agricultural economy was an early development in market gardening: Cushing's estate, "Bellmont", was furnished with extensive hothouses and conservatories for flowers & tropical fruit. It is said, Davis reported (1890), that local farmers developed the notion of growing vegetables under glass from Cushing's example. By 1865 the products of market gardening were valued at over \$111,000.

About 1857 Winthrop Chenery's Highland Stock Farm began importing pure-bred Holstein cattle (along with the cattle disease pleuro-pneumonia, not eradicated until 1888). Winthrop sold liberally of his herd in small numbers to men all over the country, and the "Holstein" name as well as many herds date from this period.

E. Architecture:

Residential:

Substantial numbers of suburban Greek Revival/Italianate houses were built in both sidehall and center hall plans, particularly along Pleasant Street at the town center and in the Waverley section. Some examples display early mansard roofs. "Bellmont" (1836), the Regency style country seat of J.P. Cushing, occupied a large estate at the southern edge of town.

Institutional:

One meetinghouse, built 1857, is recorded, as are two post offices (probably in domestic structures), and a female seminary; no known structures extant.

Commercial:

The Greek Revival/Italianate A.A. Adams Store (1852) and one other at Waverley are recorded. Other commercial structures recorded include two lyceum halls and four railroad depots; one of the stations, the octagonal Gothic Revival Wellington Hill depot (1840s) is the only known extant structure.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915):

A. Transportation Routes:

Existing railroad system expanded by addition of Central Massachusetts line along Fitchburg route (1882) with raised embankment at Belmont Center and stone arch at Common St. Electric trolley routes by early 1900s from Cambridge along Belmont Trapelo Rd to Waverley Oaks and along Grove-Bright-Concord Ave to Belmont center.

B. Population:

Rapidly growing population, offset only by the 1880 annexation of the Fresh Pond area by Cambridge. In the 15 years between 1880 and 1895, the population nearly doubled; doubled again in 1895-1910. The pressure of suburban growth increased dramatically with the opening of the subway to Cambridge about 1911. Between 1910 and 1915 the population rose from 5542 to 8081. Of the 1905 population, approximately 30% were foreign born, still predominantly Irish, though a large number were also from English-speaking Canada.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Expansion of trolley routes began speculative growth of suburban subdivisions across agricultural plain, single family houses around Payson Hill, and multiple family housing along car lines of Trapelo Rd and Concord Ave. Estate district on highlands from Belmont center along Pleasant St by early 20th century. Commercial development at town center along Leonard St, Waverley at Lexington St, and Cushing Sq at Common and Trapelo Rds.

D. Economic Base:

The town's economy remained primarily agricultural, as the products of market gardens reached all time highs of production---particularly in small fruits, such as strawberries. In 1885 the town was first in the value of fruit products in the country, and second in vegetable products.

Although gas street lights had been introduced in 1867 by the Arlington Gas Light Co., service seems to have been erratic. As a result, the town eagerly accepted the experimental electric service of the Somerville Electric Co. in 1889. By the time the town purchased the system in 1896, ten miles of streets were lit by electricity.

Beginning in the 1880s, the area in the vicinity of the present Clay Pit Pond

became the site of limited industrial activity---first by the establishment of W.H. Burke's sausage works (1886), and two years later by the opening of the Parry Brothers' brick yard. Neither appears to have been extensive, though in 1900 the New England Brick Co. took over the brick yard, increasing production to 15 million bricks annually, with a work force of 75. (The yard was exhausted and closed in 1926). Between 1903 and 1922 a small piano key factory established by Herbert Tower was in operation on adjoining land.

E. Architecture:

Residential:

Wide range of styles including well detailed examples of the Stick, Shingle, Queen Anne and Colonial Revival styles. Some mansard cottages were built as well as small numbers of modest Queen Anne workers' houses east of Clay Pit Pond. Concentrations of ambitious houses along Pleasant Street with solid suburban Shingle style and Queen Anne houses just south of Concord Ave and in the Waverley area. Probably a few later highstyle Colonial Revival houses were architect designed; "Red Top" (1877, N.H.L.), William Dean Howell's home, was designed by McKim, Mead and White.

Institutional:

Highstyle architect-designed municipal buildings built in the period include the red brick Queen Anne Town Hall (1881, Hartwell and Richardson) and the Queen Anne/Georgian Revival Underwood Library (1902, W.R. Emerson). Waverley Hall (1883) was built by public subscription. Many highstyle architect-designed Revival buildings (post 1895) set in campus-like grounds of McLean Hospital. Several Shingle style churches constructed. First public outdoor swimming pool built 1912 by landscape architect Loring Underwood.

Commercial:

Belmont Center and Cushing Square built up after 1900 as stylish commercial areas with 2 story Revival commercial blocks. Less pretentious commercial blocks at Waverley Square. A 1909 trolley barn stands on Trapelo Road at Waverley; cobbled basement Queen Anne railroad station (1908) at town center.

Industrial:

At least one extant greenhouse at Waverley Square.

X EARLY MODERN (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Rail and trolley system intact through Second World War. Abandonment of Concord Ave line in favor of buses. Local N/S autohighway, route 60 Pleasant St through Belmont center and superhighway, Route 2 over highlands in 1930s, now rebuilt as freeway.

B. Population:

Rapid rise in population continued from preceding period, slowing only after 1935.

In the 20 years, 1915-1935, Belmont's population tripled, as automobile travel made suburban life increasingly attractive. By 1940 the population had reached 26,867 - a figure which has risen by less than 1,000 persons since then (1975).

C. Settlement Patterns:

Continued development of residential areas with complete subdivision of farmland on Payson Hill plain and expansion of estate district in Belmont Hills along Route 2. Result was a corridor of almost continuous suburban development from Arlington to Watertown line along the Pleasant St axis. Expansion of commercial activity on main autoroutes with strip development along Trapelo Rd from Waverley to Pleasant and Brighton Sts. Town center expanded retail core as suburban shopping district with local centers at Cushing and Waverley Squares.

D. Economic Base:

Although commercial farming remained predominant for much of the period, the rapidly growing residential areas forced many of these farms into subdivisions. The New England Brick Co. closed their yard in 1926, and it was purchased by the town the following year.

E. Architecture:

Residential:

Large tracts south and east of center filled in with Tudor, Colonial Revival and Dutch Colonial single family houses, many incorporating brick facades. Some highstyle revival houses, including some Spanish Colonial Revival and a few 17th century Colonial Revival examples north of Washington Street. More highstyle examples along south side of Marsh Street. Concentrations of well finished two family houses in Payson Park area with less ambitious two family houses just north of railroad right-of-way behind Belmont Center. A few Colonial Revival bungalows.

Institutional:

Several Colonial Revival schools built in the 1920s.

Commercial:

Many modest one story cornerstore blocks in brick with concrete trim built. Outstanding well preserved auto showroom on Route 60 among other modest commercial industrial structures. Farms at northern edge of town converted to Golf Course.

Industrial:

Limited industrial construction around Waverley Square.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS:

Very few industrial buildings were constructed in Belmont; even fewer survived. Nevertheless, the survey did not note a 1909 trolley barn on Trapelo Road nor the 1908 cobbled railroad station at the town center. More unusual is the reputed existence of an 1884 Marion Power Shovel, abandoned under 20 feet of water in Clay Pit Pond (see Betts, 1968). The swimming pool on Concord Avenue, next to

the Memorial Library, has some surviving design features from what was reputedly the first outdoor swimming pool in the U.S., built in 1912 to designs of Loring Underwood (see Belmont Historical Society Newsletter, Dec. 1975, pp. 4-5).

Inventory is excellent on 19th century Italianate/Second Empire/Queen Anne houses at the center and along Pleasant Street. Possible First Period houses on Washington and Common deserve further investigation, as proven early dates would identify rare survivals; institutional and commercial structures (Shingle Style church on Belmont St; Tudor Rev. commercial blocks at center; early auto showroom on Rte 60, for example) deserve greater attention. Survey updates should include early modern development at Snake Hill.

XII SOURCES

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