

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

PLAINFIELD

Report Date: 1982

Associated Regional Report: Connecticut Valley

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: 1982

Community: Plainfield

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Plainfield is situated on the eastern periphery of the Hoosac Range. Local terrain is characterized as moderate to rugged in the southernmost portion of town while northeastern Plainfield moderates into relatively gentle hills. The Plainfield uplands are some of the highest in the Connecticut River study unit with elevations reaching as high as 2125' (West Mountain). Additional prominent points include Deer Hill (1992') and Warner Hill (1843'). The town is generally well drained, excluding a number of small tracts of marshland in northwestern, central and southeastern Plainfield. There are no major waterways extending through Plainfield. All local streams and brooks run south and eventually drain into the Westfield River. The Mill River, the largest waterway, extends the length of Plainfield and drains south into the Swift River, a tributary of the Westfield. Despite their limited size, local streams and brooks were powerful enough to run approximately 10 mills in the late 18th and 19th centuries. The only natural bodies of freshwater are two moderately sized ponds, the Crooked and Plainfield, situated in northwestern Plainfield. Small deposits of manganese and iron are located in southwestern Plainfield and approximately a mile and a half west of Plainfield village. Brief efforts were made in the 19th century to excavate and market the deposits. Local soil consists primarily of a heavy loam.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Originally surveyed as part of Hatfield Equivalent lands in 1744 and included within Plantation Number 5 (Cummington) in 1762 with western boundary at Plantation Number 4 (Windsor). Established as Plainfield district of Cummington in 1785 defining southern boundary and eastern line adjusted with Ashfield boundary in 1794. Northern section annexed from Hawley in 1803 defining northern boundary. Plainfield incorporated as a town in 1807.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Rural recreational hill town on intermediate corridor from Northampton to North Adams. Located in Berkshire highlands with possible native sites at Plainfield Ponds. Settled during Revolution from Cummington with local road system oriented by mid-18th century township grid. Civic focus established at Plainfield center during early Federal period including some surviving houses on Main Street and later Greek Revival church. Highland agriculture expanded to limits on surrounding uplands with several original early 19th century cottages intact from Warner to Deer Hill. Limited industrial potential with local sites along Mill Brook, including restored grist mill on River Street. Dairy farms remain active through late 19th century with notable Shingle Style complex on South Street at Cummington line. Isolation of area maintains Plainfield center as civic focus through early 20th

century with modest recreational resort at Plainfield Ponds. Present growth evident as restoration of historic period cottages from Cummington along Mill Brook. Plainfield center retains fabric as hill town, although suburban-recreational development is obvious along Route 116 axis to Plainfield Ponds.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Intermediate highland corridor from Housatonic to Deerfield valley. Probable east-west trail conjectured along axis of Pleasant-Central Street and north along flank of Warner Hill to Mill Brook, likely following north as Main Street (Route 116) to Hallockville Pond. Western branch from Mill Brook possibly followed former trail along flank of West Mountain to Plainfield Pond connecting with Main Street (Route 116). Probable trail around upper Swift River apparently followed Bow Street to Meadow Brook.

B. Settlement Patterns:

There were no reported Contact period sites. The town's limited resource base probably discouraged extensive native settlement. Native period occupation was most likely restricted to short term hunting encampments located in Plainfield's uplands and fishing sites established adjacent to Crooked and Plainfield ponds and local waterways, particularly Mill Brook.

C. Subsistence Patterns:

Limited native horticulture may have been on the town's eastern uplands, primarily adjacent to Central Street. The primary focus of native activities would have been hunting and fishing in the previously specified locations. Historically, Deer Hill (Plainfield & Cummington) was the site of a large deer population.

D. Observations:

Plainfield probably was utilized as a resource area for the Pocumtucks of Deerfield and the Norwotucks inhabiting Northampton and Hatfield. This area also may have served as a physical barrier between the Connecticut River natives and the Mohicans situated between the Hudson River Valley and the Taconic Range (New York/Massachusetts border). The potential for period sites is greatest along the Mill River, Crooked and Plainfield ponds and adjacent to Central Street.

V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails remained as local routes across uplands connecting upper Westfield valley with Plainfield Pond along axis of Route 116.

B. Population:

Plainfield probably continued to be occupied by small to moderate sized bands of natives hunting and fishing in the area.

The area lacked a colonial population until c.1770.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Native settlement patterns most likely were similar to those suggested for the preceding period.

D. Economic Base:

Connecticut River natives probably continued to utilize the Plainfield area for fishing, hunting and possibly limited horticulture. The development of Anglo-Indian trading centers in Springfield, Northampton and Westfield likely encouraged increased native trapping for fur-bearing animals on local waterways and marshlands.

E. Observations:

Plainfield probably became increasingly important as a native resource area during this period because of colonial encroachment on the traditional native core area situated along the Connecticut River.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Survey of Hatfield Equivalent (1744) established division grid along north-south axis of Mill Brook with High, Summit and Vinning Street. Survey of Township Number 5 (1762) created additional connectors to Westfield River (Cummington) with Central, South and River Street along Mill Brook and Meadow Brook axis. Primary east-west highway located as Main-Hawley Street (Route 116) from Plainfield Ponds.

B. Population:

Small bands of natives probably established encampments in Plainfield well into the 18th century.

Plainfield had a limited colonial population in this period. In 1775, the colonial settlement consisted of less than 10 families. Period settlers migrated primarily from Abington and Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Colonial settlement in Plainfield was scattered and limited to a small number of families. The community did not undergo serious settlement until the late 1770's and 1780's. The first settlement took place in c.1770 with Thomas McIntire's establishment of a home. Several additional families followed between 1770 and 1775. Local residents attended religious services in present Cummington since Plainfield lacked religious facilities.

D. Economic Base:

Local colonial residents were involved primarily in small scale crop and livestock production and lumbering. Local lumber and firewood was sold to other communities. Deer Hill in southwestern Plainfield and northwestern Cummington was the site of extensive colonial hunting. By the late 18th century, the large deer population in this area had been decimated by over-hunting. Plainfield lacked mill facilities. These most likely were sought in present Cummington.

E. Observations:

Plainfield witnessed minimal colonial development during this period. Colonial utilization was limited primarily to the small scale economic activities of local residents and resource harvesting efforts of Cummington residents. Period archaeological evidence will probably be limited because of the small degree of period settlement.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Location of meeting house at Plainfield center (1792) created radial road system along axis of Main Street (Route 116). Period highways included Central, Grand and North Street, Primary north-south axis remained along Mill Brook to Plainfield Pond as Main Street (Route 116).

B. Population:

Plainfield's population peaked in 1830 at 984 residents, giving the town a net growth rate for the period 1790-1830 of 114.8%, third highest in the county and nearly twice the county average. This unusual growth, not at all typical of a hill town (Ashfield, to the north reported 18.7%; Cummington to the south, 44%) can perhaps be attributed to the late settlement of the town. In 1790 there were still only 458 residents. In the following decade the town grew by 74%.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Location of meeting house (1792) established civic focus at Plainfield center with street village along Main Road (Route 116). Local mill sites developed along Meadow and Mill Brook with upland agriculture extended to limits of cultivation on Deer and Warner Hill.

D. Economic Base:

Largely agricultural economy, though small cloth dressing shops established on both Mill and Meadow brooks, taken over during the period by three small satinet mills with peak recorded production in 1832 of \$29,150 worth of cloth.

Several small tanneries in operation throughout period with ambitious Dorn & Remington 80-vat tannery, initiated on Mill Brook 1830.

Several grist and sawmills in operation. Probably in 1820's was the initial development of woodworking industry which in a variety of products would dominate the town in the succeeding period. By 1832 Benjamin Guyde (Gloyd?) produced wooden ware (cheese boxes, measures, boxes, dippers) reportedly valued at \$13,000 -- second highest product value in town. The making of broom handles may also have begun about the same time. John Bisbee received a patent for a turning lathe for making broom handles in 1832, though other inventors in Hadley, Shutesbury, and Leverett appear to have preceded him in the 1820's.

Probably also about this time, Plainfield women were introduced to the cottage industry of palm-leaf hat making. By 1837 hats worth nearly \$9,000 were the third most highly valued product in town.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Most of the houses standing in the town date from the Federal period. Almost all are simple cottages with the exception of a few substantial brick and frame houses at the town center. Perhaps as many as a dozen and a half houses dating between 1790 and 1830 survive across the town. One and a half story center chimney plan cottages are by far the most numerous type surviving. Most of these exhibit Cape Cod cottage features such as end wall fenestration consisting of three or four double-hung sash windows flanked by small, square fixed lights in the peak and at the eaves of the roof. Cape Cod cottage fenestration is relatively common in the highlands of western Hampshire County and may reflect the Southeastern Massachusetts origins of many of the area's settlers. Only a few two-story Federal houses were observed. These are brick houses on Pleasant Street at Central and on Central Street at Main and frame houses on Main Street (Straw-Hudson House) at the center and on street near West Mountain. The brick houses are both well crafted structures with Flemish bond masonry. All of the houses exhibit double or end chimney center hall plans; use of the center hall rather than the center chimney plan probably indicates a relatively late construction date, after 1815. Also noted in the town were a sidehall plan brick house (c.1825) on Main Street and a few one-and-a-half story cottages with small half-size windows at the cornice line; such "eyebrow" windows were common after 1830.

Institutional: The first meetinghouse (55½' x 42½') was not built until 1791, five years after the church was organized (1786). In 1790, three school districts were established, with schoolhouses built in each.

Commercial: At least two taverns (Streeter, c.1800, and Mack) operated in the period.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Local highway system remained focused around Plainfield center with axis along Main Street (Route 116). Secondary connections along north-south axis of Central Street to Cummington. No railroads projected or constructed through area.

B. Population:

Plainfield began a long decline beginning in 1830. Between that year and 1870, the town lost nearly half its population, finishing the period with 521 people.

In 1855 Plainfield had 13 foreign-born residents -- 1.9% of her population and one of the smallest percentages of any town in the county. Five of the thirteen were from Ireland.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Plainfield center remained as civic focus with axis along Main Street (Route 116). Highland farming maintained on upland plateaus around town center with decline of local mill sites.

D. Economic Base:

Diversification and expansion of Plainfield's limited industrial base, which reached its peak probably in the 1850's. Chairs and cabinetware, broom and brush handles, butter and bail boxes, pails and tubs, wagons and baskets were all produced by small shops rarely employing more than one or two persons. In 1855 and '65 the largest number of shops were devoted to making butter boxes (three shops employed three men in 1855).

Woolen production declined after 1832, though during the Civil War Streeter's Mill received a boost from war demands. Palm-leaf hat making, directed mostly out of two shops (Clark and Campbell) reached its peak about 1855 when 125 women made up braided hats. Campbell is said to have had a considerable trade with women in adjoining towns as well (Cummington and Worthington?).

Maple sugar, among other agricultural products, was one of the town's leading commodities. The 20,175 lbs. collected in 1855 represented almost a third (32%) of the county production. Homan Hallock, with experience in the 1820's as a missionary printer in the Mediterranean, returned home with the reputation of being one of only two persons who understood the manufacture of Arabic type. When the American Bible Society commenced publication of an Arabic Bible, Hallock began making the type in a shop on Mill Brook, north of the village (Dyer, 154).

E. Architecture:

Residential: Probably as many as a dozen houses and cottages were built in the 1830's and '40s. Very few houses of the mid-century and later were observed. In general, the one-and-a-half story Cape Cod type cottages with five bay facade and outer entrance remained the standard house form from the Federal period through 1850. Early Industrial period innovation can be noted in the use of double or interior chimneys and center halls rather than center chimneys, as was common in the Federal period. Two story houses are very rare with most of the larger residences observed consisting of a one-and-a-half story configuration with an additional half-story attic; the half story space is generally lit with small half-sized windows at the roofline. A few houses with such a structure were observed at the town center on Main Street.

Institutional: The second (present) meetinghouse was built in 1846 by Alonzo Parker. It is a one-and-a-half story Greek Revival with double entrances, facade pilasters and a steeple with a square base and octagonal second stage. Also built in the period was the present Town Hall, a two-story vernacular Greek Revival structure with dimensions of 32' x 46'; the structure is four bays wide with an offset entrance. The only other institutional building known to have been built in the period was a Baptist meetinghouse built in 1840-42; the Society (organized 1833) dissolved in 1866-67 and the meetinghouse was demolished.

Industrial: At least one small, water-powered mill is known to survive from the period. This is a two-story frame structure on Union Street at River Street, probably built as a turning mill.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Local highway system remained focused along Main Street axis through Plainfield center (Route 116). No railroads or street railways constructed through area.

B. Population:

Plainfield's decline slowed in the Late Industrial period. Between 1870 and 1915, the town lost only 28%. Her foreign-born population remained negligible, though French Canadians were the largest single group as early as 1880.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Civic focus remained at Plainfield center with dairy farming on surrounding uplands. Gradual development of recreational activity at Plainfield Ponds and lumbering on West Mountain and Deer Hill.

D. Economic Base:

Of Plainfield, the History of the Connecticut Valley (1879) wrote at this time:

On the whole, the village is a fair specimen of a secluded New England town, distant from railroads, having little trade or business, yet with many things to attract a visitor, in the culture and refinement of the people, the pure mountain air, and the delightful scenery.

The small size of streams, coupled with the distance from business centers by the 1870's made sharp inroads into what limited manufacturing Plainfield had. When Streeter's woolen mill burned in 1876, it was not rebuilt. In 1875 Plainfield had a total manufactured product value of \$9,150 -- the smallest in the county but for Goshen.

In the mid-1880's, there was a brief flurry of excitement when gold was discovered on West Hill. It was afterwards ascertained, however, that the claim had been salted with small specimens of California ore by a young man living in the vicinity who wished "to create a little excitement" (Dyer, 13).

Throughout the Late Industrial period, the town recorded a steady increase in agricultural products -- especially potatoes (the town was said to lead all others "in this section" in potatoes), poultry, cattle raising, maple sugar, and apples.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Very few houses were built in the town until after 1900. Among the few houses observed were several sidehall and double chimney center entrance Italianate cottages on Union and Main Streets and a two-story double chimney Italianate house on Main Street. After 1900, a few simple Colonial Revival and Craftsman cottages and houses were built, primarily along Route 116. One Colonial Revival house with a square plan and pyramidal hip roof was observed on Route 116; the other structures were generally one-story gable roofed cottages. Also noted was a Shingle Style cottage with cobblestone masonry on Route 116 and a Shingle Style farmstead on South Street.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Improvement of east-west axis as secondary auto highway Route 116 through Plainfield center as Main Street.

B. Population:

The town's population recorded a net loss of 111 residents during the period, though small gains were made in the late '20s and early '30s. By 1940 her population stood at 264. The town's nadir was not reached until 1945, at pop. 224, and only slight gains were made in the following twenty-five years.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Plainfield center maintained as local civic focus with dairy farming on adjacent uplands. Plainfield Ponds developed as local recreational area along Route 116 axis.

D. Economic Base:

No new industry identified. Agricultural and summer-tourist oriented economy exclusively.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Very little residential construction occurred in the period. Most of the houses built are very modest one-story cottages of the 1920's. Some small-scale summer house development occurred

as 19th century houses were purchased and maintained by out-of-towners.

Institutional: Only one institutional building was built in the period. This is the Hallock Memorial School and Library (1925), a small, one-story, L-plan Colonial Revival building located on Main Street at the town center.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS:

General: Almost all of the town's significant architecture dates from the Federal and Early Industrial periods. Along Main Street at the town center are located several notable brick Federal houses and Greek Revival institutional buildings. Of particular note is the cluster of houses at the crossroads of Main and Central Streets. Other period houses are scattered across the town in isolated locations. There is no existing inventory for Plainfield.

XII. SOURCES

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