

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

TOLLAND

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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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: May 1982

COMMUNITY: Tolland

I. Topography

Tolland falls within a complex of rugged uplands that are part of the Hoosac Range, which originates in southern Vermont. The uplands generally average over 1200 feet in elevation. Located in northern Tolland is the highest point, Lair Mountain, with an elevation of 1695 feet. Substantial pockets of marshland occur throughout the town, the majority of which are situated in central Tolland. Local soil is primarily stony and poor for agriculture. The town is situated within the Farmington River drainage. Area streams drain south and ultimately feed into this river. The town has several bodies of fresh water; all but one are located in northern Tolland.

II. Political Boundaries

Tolland was originally included as part of Bedford plantation (Granville) in 1718 from an earlier grant of 1686, with a southern boundary at the Massachusetts-Connecticut line (1713). It was established as part of Granville in 1754 with its western limit at Farmington River (Sandisfield), and its northern boundary was at the Blandford line (1741). Incorporated as the Town of Tolland in 1810 from the West Granville parish, its eastern boundary was set at the Granville line.

III. Historic Overview

Tolland is a rural hill town on a secondary corridor between Westfield and Great Barrington along the Connecticut border. Located in the eastern Berkshire highlands on the upper Farmington River, there are possible native sites suspected at Noyes Pond. Belated upland settlement occurred during the Colonial Period from Granville. Tolland Center formed along the Route 57 axis after the Revolution, preserving authentic late 18th century houses in their original setting. Because of limited agricultural potential, there existed primarily cattle grazing for butter and cheese; some Federal Period farmsteads are intact near the town center. Agricultural economy remained through the 19th century, with simple Greek Revival houses along the Route 57 axis. Attempted development of the Farmington River area as a railroad corridor failed after the Civil War, maintaining isolation of the area from industrial development. Recreational potential was realized with auto access from Connecticut after the First World War; an early summer camp is intact at Victory Lake and a resort farm at Noyes Pond. Present development is evident as recreational use along the Route 8 corridor (Farmington River) in Tolland State Forest. The town center retains remarkable period character, while early summer camps appear neglected as historic landscapes.

IV. Contact Period (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes

An isolated corridor existed through the lower Berkshire highlands to the Housatonic Valley, with no obvious trail routes. A possible east-west location to the Farmington River from Woronoco (Westfield) is conjectured from Hubbard River (Hall Pond Brook) to Trout and Noyes Pond, connecting by Turning Pond to farming valley. Secondary north-south trail may have followed segments of Amos Case Road by Hall Pond and Chestnut Hill.

B. Settlement Patterns

There were no reported native sites in Tolland. Native period settlement was probably limited, due to the area's rugged terrain and lack of major freshwater sources. The fertile agricultural land and water sources situated in Westfield, West Springfield, and Agawam would have been far more attractive to the Connecticut River Valley natives. Native settlement probably consisted primarily of hunting and fishing camps situated in the town's uplands and adjacent to the several natural ponds, particularly Southeast Bay and Noyes Pond.

C. Subsistence Patterns

Limited agriculture was possible in the somewhat gentler slopes of the uplands of central and southeastern Tolland. The predominantly rugged, wooded terrain and marshlands were more suited as habitats for wild game. The town's several ponds likely provided moderate sources of fish; historically, Noyes Pond was said to be an excellent source, particularly of pickerel.

D. Observations

Tolland was situated on the outer periphery of the heavily-settled Connecticut River Valley. This area, along with other nearby hill towns such as Blandford, Russell, and Southwick probably functioned as a resource area for the native valley settlements. The likelihood for extant period sites is low, considering the probability of low-density period settlement. Some evidence of native occupation may occur adjacent to Southeast Bay, Noyes Pond, and central and southeastern Tolland.

V. Plantation Period (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes

Native trails remained in place as local routes to upper Farmington River and the Housatonic Valley.

B. Population

There is no documentation of a native period population. However, there was probably a small native population, considering the presence of a probable Plantation Period rockshelter situated adjacent to the town's western boundary and slightly south of Chestnut Hill, as well as the lack of a colonial population.

C. Settlement Patterns

Tolland appeared to continue to function primarily as the location of small hunting and fishing camps, as suggested by the native period rockshelter. Colonial settlement did not take place until ca. 1750.

D. Economic Base

Native use of the Tolland area probably differed little from that of the Contact Period.

Colonial utilization of Tolland's woodlands and freshwater ponds probably did not occur until the 18th century.

C. Observations

Tolland continued as a virtually undeveloped upland area during this period. The lack of colonial settlement and economic development was largely due to the availability of more desirable tracts of agricultural land and water sources further east in the Connecticut River Valley.

VI. Colonial Period (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes

Establishment of Bedford Township (Granville) prescribed a pattern of lot division highways by 1738 (Massachusetts Archives, Dwight Plan). A primary east-west highway was located as West Granville Road (Route 57), with north-south division rangeways of Colebrook River, Clubhouse, Schoolhouse, Hartland, and Beetle Roads. Secondary north-south highways along the mountain crest were East Otis and Burt Hill Roads.

B. Population

If Tolland had a native Colonial Period population, it is unlikely there were more than a handful of native occupants.

There were no specific period figures for Tolland's colonial population. This area was the least populated portion of Old Granville (present Tolland and Granville). Old Granville was occupied by approximately 75 families in 1754. This figure had increased to 1126 residents in 1776. Most of Tolland's period settlers were former residents of present Granville.

C. Settlement Patterns

Tolland suffered no damage or loss of life during the French and Indian wars of the 18th century. The area was the last portion of the Bedford Plantation (present Granville, Tolland) settled when the first settlers arrived ca. 1750. The Bedford proprietors encouraged settlement by offering large tracts of land at low prices. Generally, settlement was scattered. A small settlement node was established in the general vicinity of Tolland Center by the end of the period.

D. Economic Base

The focal point of Tolland's Colonial Period economy was agriculture, particularly livestock and dairy production. Local uplands were well suited for cattle grazing, hay, and some grain production. However, the extensive rugged terrain and rocky soil provided local farmers with little high quality agricultural land for extensive and diversified crop production. Local industry is poorly documented, although it appears that there were few, if any, mills operating in Tolland.

E. Architecture

Residential: Only two houses of the period are believed to survive. Both of these are located at Tolland Center, originally known as West Granville. The earliest documented house is the Titus Flower House (ca.1772), a two-story center chimney structure with a five-bay facade and second story and end gable hewn overhangs. The entrance surround and windows are all topped with triangular pediments. The only other house of the period is located on Clubhouse Road, just north of the village center. This is a three-bay wide center chimney structure with an added lean-to. The chimney is ornamented with pilasters, suggesting a relatively early date (ca.1750) of construction. The pilastered chimney also indicates the great isolation of the region in the Colonial Period, for chimneys with pilasters had ceased to be built in eastern Massachusetts some 30 to 50 years earlier. The only other construction of note for the period was Deacon Rose's "fort," built ca.1745 and long since demolished. Built of stone, the fort served double duty as a garrison against Indian attack and as Deacon Rose's dwelling. This was the only known example of stone fortification in the region.

F. Observations

Tolland failed to develop during this and subsequent periods because of the area's rugged terrain, absence of high quality agricultural land, and of extensive freshwater sources. As a result, the Tolland area residents were probably highly dependent upon present Granville and Westfield for mill facilities, agricultural produce, etc. The present town retains the basic settlement pattern of this period. Several of the original township rangeways still survive as existing roads, such as

Colebrook River and Rivers Road. The potential for extant period archaeological sites is good, particularly in the vicinity of Tolland Center.

VII. Federal Period (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes

The primary east-west highway remained as West Granville Road (Route 57) to Farmington River (Sandisfield). Establishment of the Tolland meeting house (1795) confirmed the existing highway pattern from the Colonial Period, with little obvious adjustment. There was a primary connector from Granville to Otis as a secondary corridor along Amos Case Road in the northeast section. No turnpikes were surveyed or constructed through the area.

B. Population

Tolland's earliest recorded population statistics noted 798 residents in 1810. This was the peak recorded year for Tolland. Since that date, the population has steadily declined. Crop failures in 1815 were said to have been particularly discouraging to local farmers already disheartened by the rocky soil. The number of residents in 1830 was 723.

C. Settlement Patterns

The meeting house located at West Granville (Tolland) Center (1795) created a local civic focus. Agriculture expanded on available farmland, primarily for cattle grazing for butter and cheese. There was limited development of mill sites along Farmington River from New Boston (Sandisfield).

D. Economic Base

In 1794 the official town surveyor described the condition of Granville and Tolland:

This town is altogether mountainous and a considerable part of it a barren heath covered with hemlock and other green woods. The valleys are fruitful producing corn. The hills and other grounds that are acceptable afford excellent pasturage and mowing. It is to appearances at a distance, one continued cluster of green mountains.

Throughout the Federal Period, no significant change can be observed in this portrait, although the town's population steadily declined from its peak recorded year, 1810.

E. Architecture

Residential: Very few houses were built in Tolland in the Federal Period. The only period houses observed were located on Route 57. These include a few center and end chimney, two-story five-bay structures and one more substantial late Georgian house at Tolland Center. This house is a two-story center chimney structure with a five-bay facade treatment on the front and side walls.

Institutional: The third parish of Granville (now Tolland, originally West Granville) was organized c.1795; a church was built shortly thereafter. While the town records for the period 1810-1849 burned in a Northampton fire, there seems to be little likelihood that any major additional institutional construction occurred in the period in Tolland. Three schoolhouses stood in Tolland in 1830.

VIII. Early Industrial Period (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes

West Granville Road remained the primary east-west corridor (Route 57) to Farmington River, with little change in the local pattern. The railroad projected along Farmington River from Connecticut to Pittsfield in 1848 was the north-south connector from New Haven (Keith, Berkshire History, 1888, p.424).

B. Population

Tolland's population continued to decline, from 723 in 1830 to 509 in 1870, although in the 1850s the number of residents remained unchanged for a time. In 1855 7% of the population were immigrants, 38 of the 44 naming Ireland as their place of birth.

C. Settlement Patterns

Tolland Center was maintained as the civic focus along the axis of West Granville Road (Route 57). Dairy farming remained the primary economic activity on available upland.

D. Economic Base

Limited agricultural economy continued to dominate the town, with stock raising and considerable butter and cheese production. In 1855 Tolland reported 40 men employed in maple sugar making with an annual product worth \$26,700 - the only instance of its production in the county in that year.

Probably by the 1850s, Albert Hull had established a tannery on the Farmington River above New Boston, which by the 1860's would dominate the manufacture in the town. It

was clock making, however, which in the 1840s was the town's largest industry. In an unnamed shop, 20 men were recorded as having produced \$40,000 worth of clocks in 1845. According to the state manufacturing census for that year, it was the only clock shop recorded in the Valley, and the largest in the state, responsible for 72% of the value of all clocks produced in Massachusetts. Perhaps the clockmaker strayed out of Connecticut's Naugatuck Valley in the mid 1840s, for there is no evidence of him before or after this period.

In the 1860s the town's single largest employers were the textile mills at Colebrook River, a mile south of the town in Colebrook, Connecticut. After the Civil War, the Colebrook River mills were hurt by competition from the larger mills with railroad connections, and two New Boston men, Northway and Burt, were among those who planned a railroad to link the West Stockbridge Railroad at Lee with the Farmington Valley line to New Haven (tannery owner Albert Hull was named an associate incorporator in 1870). The rail line was the planning descendent of an 1848 scheme, the Pittsfield and New Haven Railroad, which would have followed the same route along the Tolland-Sandisfield line.

Prosperity was anticipated imminently!

E. Architecture

Residential: Almost no construction took place in the period. Of the dozen or so period houses observed in the town, most are sidehall plan Greek Revival structures or more modest Italianate cottages with two-bay facades and side entrances. Now standing on Clubhouse Road is a large and elaborate Greek Revival house with a hip-roofed main block flanked by a pair of two-story ells; built ca. 1835 in Winsted (Winchester), Connecticut, the house was moved c.1981 to its present site. Although the exterior appears to be intact, none of the building's frame or interior details have been retained. A few more substantial double interior-chimney, five-bay, center entrance Italianate farmhouses were observed in the town, along Route 57 and on Colebrook River and Burt Hill Roads.

Institutional: A Baptist society was organized in 1830, but no church was built. In 1842, the present Congregational Church was built. It is a simple one-and-a-half story Greek Revival structure with a single center entrance and a square one-stage belfry with peaked parapets. Also built in the period was the Town Hall (ca.1850), a one-story Greek Revival/Italianate building with a center entrance and end gable pediment. In 1879, the town had eight school districts, but no schools are known to survive.

IX. Late Industrial Period (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes

The Farmington River Railroad was constructed as the Lee and New Haven in 1872, and it was abandoned with the Panic of 1873 (Keith, pp.426,188). Cement sections of the roadbed maybe intact along the river valley.

B. Population

Tolland's population continued to decline, from 509 in 1870 to 199 in 1915. Between 1890 and 1895 alone, the town lost 84 persons; between 1905 and 1910, another 94. In 1880, 21 Frenchmen (from Quebec?) dominated the 11% immigrant population, said to have come to town to build the railroad. By 1905, the largest group of immigrants were 12 Germans.

C. Settlement Patterns

Tolland Center maintained the civic focus, and summer camps were established at Noyes Pond and Victory Lake (Wynbrooke) after the First World War.

D. Economic Base

Construction began on the Lee and New Haven Railroad in 1872. A year later, during the financial panic which struck, Governor Livingston vetoed the Railroad Aid Bill, cutting off the anticipated state support in a five-page message to the Legislature. Construction came "to a sudden, choking halt." Tolland, Sandisfield, and Otis had all committed town money to the project; withdrawal of state support left the town with a \$20,000 debt which it was forced to amortize. Town taxes rose to an exorbitant level, and there werewidespread farm failures. Many farms were sold for next to nothing.

In 1875 Albert Hull's tannery was the largest (and virtually the only) manufacturing industry in town, with a reported annual product value of \$75,470. In addition, there were eight sawmills, two shingle mills, a turning mill, and a bedstead factory operated by Charles N. Marshall. "The soil," one historian wrote at the time, "is generally poor and does not yield sufficient to supply the needs of farmers who annually purchase grain in Westfield." There were no stores within the entire limits of the town in 1879.

E. Architecture

Residential: Less than a dozen period residences have survived in Tolland. Most of those observed are modest sidehall plan Queen Anne structures, built around the turn of the century.

X. Early Modern Period (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes

There was improvement of local roads as auto highways, with Route 57 a secondary east-west corridor from Granville to Great Barrington.

B. Population

Tolland's population, the smallest in the county - in 1935 and in 1975 - continued to decline, from 199 in 1915 to 129 in 1940. In 1960 it had reached its nadir of 101.

C. Settlement Patterns

Local focus remained as a street village at Tolland Center, with dairy farming along the axis of Route 57.

D. Economic Base

Cattle raising and dairying were the chief occupations. The harvest of apples and maple syrup also provided employment, as they do today. The 1960 order by the state requiring dairy farms to install 2,000 gallon milk storage tanks has eliminated many small dairying operations in recent years.

E. Architecture

Residential: Very modest construction occurred during the period. Most of this consists of small one-story shingled or clapboarded gable or hip-roof cottages, probably built in the 1920s. Some resort construction at Noyes Pond and Southeast Bay in the northern half of the village may date from the period.

XI. Survey Observations

All significant structures have been inventoried in Tolland; however, historical documentation is scant due to the survey method, apparently a windshield survey. Any further work should provide additional historical documentation. Particularly useful would be a construction date for the 18th century house on Clubhouse Road (MHC inventory form, Area A, number 1).

XII. Sources

Clark, Joseph, Tolland, The High Country (p.p., 1979).

----- , Tolland, A Sudden Fall (p.p., ca.1981).

Keith, Berkshire History (1888).