

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

BROOKFIELD

Report Date: 1984

Associated Regional Report: Central Massachusetts

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: 1984

COMMUNITY: Brookfield

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Brookfield is located in the southwestern corner of Worcester County. Its topography is dominated by the broad meadows and valley of the Quaboag River, which flows northwestward through the northern end of the town. This broad valley was once the bed of Glacial Lake Brookfield, a large lake which extended from West Brookfield to East Brookfield. Much of the clay utilized by the large brickworks of East Brookfield, North Brookfield, and Brookfield during the late 19th and early 20th centuries was deposited during this phase of the glacier's retreat. The gently rolling hills located north and south of the valley are cut by numerous streams, which flow between the north-south ridges into the Quaboag River. Elevations in the river valley are about 600 feet above sea level, while the hills rise to more than 900 feet above sea level. Quaboag Pond, the source of the Quaboag River, and Quacumquasit Pond lie on the southeastern portion of town and form part of the boundary with East Brookfield.

The town center, located north of the Quaboag River, occupies a small plateau consisting of Merrimac loam, heavy phase, and Brookfield loam. The former, derived from glacial and terrace deposits laid down under shallow, moving water, continues southeastward to the shores of Quaboag Pond. Brookfield loam and Brookfield stony loam are found on the hilltops and slopes, with occasional rounded hills, or drumlins, covered by rich Paxton loam. These soils are all agriculturally important and productive, particularly well suited to growing hay, grains, and potatoes.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Part included in original 1660 Quaboag Plantation grant, provisionally established as township of Brookfield in 1673. Enlarged, eight mile square township granted in 1718. Part included in new town of Western (later Warren) in 1742. Part included in district of New Braintree, 1751. Part established as North Brookfield, 1812. Part annexed to Ware, 1823. Part established as West Brookfield, 1848. Part of North Brookfield annexed, 1854. Part incorporated as East Brookfield, 1920.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Residential and agricultural community on the Quaboag River corridor, with many native sites likely, particularly at Quaboag and Quacumquasit Ponds. Peripheral area of 17th century Quaboag Plantation settlement focus at Foster Hill (now West Brookfield). Prosperous, dispersed, 18th century agricultural settlement, with Third Parish meetinghouse site established north of Quaboag River

in 1755. Federal period, Post Road village (South Brookfield) develops at meetinghouse center. 19th century village growth is further stimulated by 1839 Western Railroad connection, and development of local boot and shoe industry. Population declines in first half of 20th century, followed by lakeside cottage development and dispersed suburban growth. Significant functional agricultural landscapes remain, and the 19th century central village remains largely intact.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes

East-west Quaboag River corridor, with secondary north-south highland tributary trails. Conjectured east-west trail north of Quaboag Pond (Main Street-West Brookfield Road), with north branch on North Brookfield Road, and possible southeast branch north of Quaboag Pond on Route 9-Quaboag Street. Southwest trail to Brimfield conjectured on Fiskdale Road-Webber Road. East-west trail south of Quaboag corridor conjectured on Long Hill Road-Rice Corner Road-Cross Road between Quaboag and Quacumquasit Ponds. South trail to Alum Pond on Rice Corner Road.

B. Settlement Pattern

The area west of Quaboag Pond and along the Quaboag River has been one of central Massachusetts' richest collecting areas, with a large number of sites ranging from Middle Archaic through Late Woodland periods. Here, too, was the reputed location of the primary Contact period Quabaug "village," Quabagud/Quabacutt. This was the focus of a larger region of the same name, and based on the word Squabaug, "red water place."

C. Subsistence Pattern

This "village" site served as a base camp for the Quabaug group, who gathered here on a seasonal basis, primarily for fishing. Nearby areas are visited for exploitation, for agriculture, and hunting by families and task groups.

V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes

Contact period trails continue in use. Main east-west Quaboag corridor trail improved as "Bay Path" (?) from Worcester to Brookfield by 1673 (Temple 1887). Southeast trail north of Quacumquasit Pond conjectured as part of improved Woodstock-Brookfield road.

B. Settlement Pattern

In 1649, Eliot visited the area to preach. The area now Brookfield was the south and slightly east portion of the six-mile grant to Ipswich petitioners in 1660. The focus of settlement was

on Foster's Hill, in West Brookfield, but apparently extended into the northwest section of Brookfield. The 20-acre house lots were located close to one another with outlying fields and meadows.

C. Subsistence Pattern

The area continued to be exploited by Quabaugs, with interruption and reduction due to inter-tribal warfare; colonials occupied a portion of this area for homelots, and the remainder as outlying fields, woodlot, and meadow.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes

The main east-west route north of the Quaboag River is laid out as the Post Road in 1753 (West Brookfield Road-Main Street), and the southeast branch north of Quaboag Pond is improved as the road to Charlton. Trails to Brimfield and Sturbridge are improved as roads, and new roads are laid out from outlying farms of the southern highlands to the Third Parish meetinghouse after 1754.

B. Population

As part of the larger grant of Brookfield, whose center was located in West Brookfield, no separate figures are available for this smaller area, and aggregate figures are reported in that town report. By the time of the formation of this area as Third, or South, Parish in 1753, it is clear that the majority of the population is located in the south part of the grant.

C. Settlement Pattern

With resettlement, the focus of public buildings remained on Foster's Hill. The south and eastern areas of the grant (expanded to eight square miles in 1718) were settled as dispersed farmsteads. By mid century, there were sufficient settlers in this area to bring conflict to the discussion of meetinghouse location. When Warren was broken off (1740) and the north area made Second Parish (1750), dissatisfaction continued from people in the south and east over crossing Foster's Hill to go to meeting. This meetinghouse was located in the center of the area, but the bulk of the population was located to the south of the new location. This resulted in the formation of Third or South Parish in 1753, with its meetinghouse located to the north and west of the area it was to serve.

D. Economic Base

This area shared with the entire Brookfield grant an initial period of struggle followed by prosperity in an agrarian community of dispersed farmsteads.

E. Architecture

Residential: Few period survivals noted. One house on common may be of period or fourth quarter 18th century: it appears to have been a two-story, three- or five-bay structure that now has a three-bay, center-entry, gable end facade facing the common. Earlier keystone arches on windows visible on what would have been rear (now side) of house. One structure (possibly a school?) said to be 1737 is a one-story, five-bay, center chimney form, but door is in gable end and stairs are along rear wall of south room. Owner says no evidence of door in traditional location. Reference to approximately 20 dwellings destroyed in 1765 by native attack.

Institutional: First meetinghouse was burned 1675. Second meetinghouse erected on site of first, 1715-16, and measured 45 x 35 feet. Third meetinghouse of same dimensions erected in 1755.

Schoolhouse referred to prior to 1701. Town voted to build four schools in 1728.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes

Colonial highways continue in use.

B. Population

Figures throughout this period include both East and West Brookfield, and until 1820, North Brookfield. The town continued to grow, from 2,649 in 1776 to 3,284 in 1800, followed by a dip during the following two decades, the latter due to a splitting off of the north, to 2,292 in 1820. Growth returned so that the final figure equalled 2,342. At the end of this period, the Third Parish society became avowedly Unitarian, producing an important lawsuit, and resulting in the formation of the Evangelical Society in 1826. In addition, Methodists began meeting in the town during this period.

C. Settlement Pattern

Linear Post Road village (South Brookfield) develops at Third Parish meetinghouse center at River Street/Main Street intersection, with addition of new Evangelical (1828) and Unitarian (1830) Congregational churches south of Main Street. The Wesleyan Methodist Episcopal Church (1827) locates southeast of the center on Quaboag Road. Dispersed agricultural settlement continues.

D. Economic Base

In the late 18th century, prior to the separation of Brookfield into the towns of North Brookfield (1812), West Brookfield (1848), East Brookfield (1920), and Brookfield, the town was the most important in the county. Its economy was agricultural, based on

mixed husbandry. Brookfield's farms yielded large crops of hay and grains and produced livestock, butter, and cheese. Cattle-raising for meat and dairy products was the major agricultural activity.

Agricultural land use and livestock-raising intensified through the early decades of the 19th century. Acres of improved land increased as more land was converted to pasture and mowing to accommodate the increasing sheep and cattle herds. By 1820, Brookfield's farms averaged 12.3 sheep and 4.9 milk cows each, up from 2.8 cows and 5.1 sheep in 1784. Improved acreage more than doubled in order to provide hay and grains for the animals. Butter and cheese were produced in great quantities on the farms for home and market.

Most families pursued some home manufactures such as textile, shoe, or woodenware manufactures into the early 19th century, but this activity declined significantly toward mid century. Although several industries--boot- and shoemaking, an iron foundry, and machinery manufacture--were begun in Brookfield by 1830, they were located in the areas which later split off to become separate towns. In 1830, present-day Brookfield contained only three sawmills and a grist mill along its streams, and several curriers, who supplied the shoe industry in North and West Brookfield. A number of women were employed in their homes in the production of straw, braid, and palm-leaf hats.

E. Architecture

Residential: Two-story, five-bay dwellings, several with hipped roofs and one double-pile brick example with a fanlit doorway, were noted. A ca. 1820-30 two-story, double-pile, double chimney brick house was also recorded. Fourth-quarter 18th century Federal houses noted along Long Hill Road included a one-story, five-bay, center chimney gambrel roof (ca. 1780), a two-story, five-bay, center chimney with "beverly jog" (ca. 1790), and a two-story, asymmetrical, center chimney plan (ca. 1790). Also of note is a two-story, three-bay, center chimney dwelling with a hip-on-hip roof and small boxed corner posts on Lake Road. In the Center, facing both the common and Route 9, is a three-story, hipped roof, asymmetrical structure with a two-and-a-half-story, five-bay Greek Revival wing on the north facing Route 9. Portions of the building may be late 18th century. It is listed as a store in 1871.

Institutional: First Congregational Church erected in 1794 is a two-story building seven bays deep with a pedimented door surround, quoins, and a three-story tower with belfry on the gable end.

Commercial: Brookfield House in Center on Route 9 is a two-story, five-bay structure with a late 19th/early 20th century gambrel roof. Possibility of its originally having had a center chimney. Date uncertain, may be second-quarter 19th century; appears on 1871 atlas.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes

The Western Railroad opens service along the Quaboag River corridor, south of South Brookfield village, in 1839.

B. Population

Figures still available for town including later subdivisions. Including both West and East Brookfield, the town's population continued to grow, to 2,472 in 1846. With separation of the West, the total equalled 1,674 in 1850 and grew to 2,527 in 1870, with one slight drop between 1860 and 1865. Agricultural employment grew dramatically, multiplying four times in the three towns between 1820 and 1840, with a doubling of manufacturing.

Immigration into the town by the foreign-born was moderate during this period, fluctuating between 10% and 14%. The Irish predominated initially, with increasing numbers of French Canadians, and small numbers of English. St. Mary's Church was formed to serve the Catholics in the town in 1867. In 1865 a library association was formed.

C. Settlement Pattern

After the 1841 rail connection, and the 1848 separation of West Brookfield, significant growth occurs in the central village, primarily south toward the railroad depot. Central Street, east of the common, becomes the main industrial/institutional focus, with the Merrick Library, town house, and boat factory (1842, 1870). The Methodist church moves to the Center, a new Evangelical church is built in 1857, and a new Unitarian church is built in 1868, after the old Unitarian church is sold and moved to Lincoln Street to become St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church (1867). Residential development extends to the east along School and High Streets, and south beyond Lincoln Street on River, Howard, and Kimball Streets. A small industrial development begins south of the railroad along Mill Street.

Outside the Center, dispersed agricultural settlement continues, with a small secondary hamlet south of the Quaboag River at Fiskdale Road/Rice Corner Road.

D. Economic Base

During the period prior to the Civil War, Brookfield remained the most conservative and least industrialized of the Brookfields. Its limited manufactures were most directly tied to agriculture, containing the majority of carriers in the Brookfields, together with four boot and shoe manufacturers, a plow and sleigh maker, several blacksmiths, and several sawmills. Boot- and shoemaking was by far the largest industry in Brookfield. Kimball and Robinson, established in 1830, became the second largest firm in the Brookfields by 1850 and employed 245 men and women who

produced 230,000 pairs of brogans, largely for Southern slaves. By 1875, the four boot and shoe factories had recovered from the loss of Southern slave markets and employed 450 men and women in the production of \$563,135 worth of goods. In East Brookfield, then still a part of Brookfield, manufacturing enterprises in 1870 included an iron furnace, cotton mill, soap factory, brickyard, wheel manufactory, and several saw and grist mills.

In agriculture, Brookfield farmers continued more traditional ways than their contemporaries in North and West Brookfield, who adopted more market-oriented practices. Mixed husbandry and dairying continued much as they had earlier, though the amount of grains raised had decreased. Brookfield farmers also owned less horses and relied more on oxen than the farmers in North and West Brookfield. The raising of livestock was still the dominant activity, but the variety of animals raised diminished. Sheep-raising fell off sharply as did the raising of hogs; nevertheless, Brookfield contained more sheep in 1875 than any other town in Worcester County. The number of milk cows, heifers, steers, and oxen continued to increase. Butter and cheese were important products of the farm's dairies through the 1860s. Between 1865 and 1875, however, the sale of whole milk increased from 3,685 gallons to 89,327 gallons, as milk was sold to several cheese factories in the area instead of being processed on the farm.

E. Architecture

Residential: One- and two-story gable end, side passage plans popular throughout the period. Two-story, three-bay Greek Revival, flushboarded temple front house faces common in Center. Two two-story, four-bay houses resembling side-passage exterior form appear to date from the second quarter of the century; one is brick. A mid-century, two-story, four-bay center chimney house was noted. Of special note on Molasses Hill Road is a Greek Revival dwelling of two stories and five bays wide with a hipped roof and end chimneys with a delicate cornice moulding. A Doric portico is on one side of the house. Two two-and-a-half-story, double chimney mansard roofed houses of three bays each, one with central pavillion, are located on Route 9 in the Center.

Institutional: First Congregational Church (of 1794) thoroughly remodelled and significantly altered in 1838. An 1860s Romanesque, finely detailed, gable end Evangelical Congregational church stands on the common at Central Avenue. Methodist Episcopal church appears on 1870 atlas at corner of Route 9 and common across from Brookfield House. A town hall was built ca. 1867.

Commercial: Two hotels were operating ca. 1870.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes

In the 1890s, east-west streetcar service is established through Brookfield Center along the Main-Central-Maple Street corridor by the Warren, Brookfield, and Spencer Electric Railway Company.

B. Population

The town's population grew steadily in the first twenty years of the period, from 2,527 in 1870 to 3,352 in 1890. Thereafter, the total declined, particularly from 3,062 in 1900 to 2,388 in 1905, and finally to 2,059 in 1915. During the early portion, manufacturing accounted for more than twice the employment as agriculture, but by 1905 the two were nearly equal for males. In the next decade, agricultural employment dropped further, so that 50% more were employed in manufacturing. By 1885, the French Canadians equalled the Irish, overtaking them ten years later when the foreign-born portion of the population peaked at 21.6%. Although the proportion diminished, it became more diverse with the addition of Italians and later, Poles.

C. Settlement Pattern

Development of the center village continues to the 1890s, with new residences built northeast on Green Street, southeast on Maple Street (along the streetcar corridor), and south along Kimball Street. The Brookfield Shoe Company factory is established on the railroad corridor east of the depot. In 1884, a new library (Bannister Memorial Hall) is built at the southeast corner of the common on Lincoln Street. The Unitarian church is replaced in 1912 after a fire. Outside the Center, some residential development occurs north of Quaboag Pond.

D. Economic Base

Brookfield experienced little industrial growth during the years between the Civil War and the First World War. Shoe manufacturing suffered during the early 1880s depression in the industry, but a return to prosperity in the late 1880s and early 1890s contributed to the greatest population in the town's history to the present. Several new shoe and shoe part manufacturers were established during this time. However, labor problems at the G. H. Burt Shoe Co., the town's largest employer, caused the removal of the firm to Lynn in 1896 and began the town's decline. The establishment of the Brookfield Pressed Brick Co. and the Hyde Box Mfg. in 1896 and rubber boot and shoe manufacturing in the Burt factory in 1897 eased the impact of the town's loss, but did not halt the decline. Most small, craft-oriented shops such as carpentry shops, shoe shops, blacksmith shops, a wagon manufactory, and a jeweller's shop had closed by the turn of the century.

The value of Brookfield's agricultural production increased dramatically after the Civil War from under \$70,000 in 1865 to

more than \$200,000 in 1905. The largest increases were in the dairy. In 1865, dairy products from Brookfield and East Brookfield farms (they were still undivided at this time) were valued at about \$4,000; by 1905 the total was \$67,826 and included the sale of 326,103 gallons of milk, nearly 29,000 lbs. of butter, and nearly 22,000 lbs. of cream. One hundred twenty of the 173 farms were also involved in poultry-raising, which accounted for 7% of the total value of agricultural goods.

Land use from the 1880s to the early 20th century became less intensive and less diversified. Grain and root crops continued to decline as Brookfield's farmers focused more on dairying and cattle-raising. Marginal lands and former permanent pasture lands reverted to woodlands; by 1905, 1,000 acres less were in permanent pasture than in 1885 and woodland increased from 2,461 acres in 1875 to 4,300 acres in 1885 and to 5,527 acres in 1905. The size of mixed husbandry farms decreased through the period; between 1895 and 1905 their size fell from an average of 60 acres to 47 acres, while dairy farms increased in size from 81 acres to 112 acres. More than 2,000 acres were removed from agriculture during this decade alone. The amount of land in hay in 1905, 3,240 acres, was probably at its highest, increasing with the greater specialization in dairying.

E. Architecture

Residential: Little major development apparent from survivals. Gable end, side-passage plans continue to remain popular.

Institutional: Town had fifteen schools by 1880, including a grammar school and a high school. Merrick Public Library constructed on common in 1883-84 is a two-story, Victorian Gothic red brick building with sandstone trim.

The town hall, ca. 1900, is a modest Colonial Revival two-story, brick structure which also houses the fire station.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes

The main east-west road through the Center (West Brookfield Road-East Brookfield Road) is improved early as part of the main automobile route between Boston and New York, with a bypass northeast of the Center (Route 5, later Route 20, finally Route 9).

B. Population

After a brief expansion to 2,216 in 1920, the population total dropped, in part due to the formation of East Brookfield. From 1,401 in 1925, the figure dropped to 1,393 in 1940. Only 7.9% were foreign-born, and 21.5% were classified as rural.

C. Settlement Pattern

Little change occurs. Some residential infill takes place in the Center. Most new development is located on the north shore of Quaboag Pond.

D. Economic Base

Brookfield's industries following World War I consisted of the Gavitt Mfg. Co., which manufactured insulated wire in the old Burt shoe factory, and the McLaurin Jones Co., which produced gummed papers. These firms provided the sole manufacturing employment in Brookfield during the 1920s and 1930s.

Agriculture remained the main occupation of the town's residents, with dairying still the dominant activity. Brookfield became well known for its large and improved Jersey herds. Much land remained open as mowing and for the raising of corn as feed for the cattle. Nevertheless, woodlands continued to increase as less productive and marginal lands were taken out of cultivation and less and less people remained active farmers. Poultry-raising was carried on on most farms, although several began to specialize in breeding and raising chickens.