

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

NORTHBOROUGH

Report Date: 1983

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: January 1983

COMMUNITY: Northborough

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Principal part of town consists of a valley, open to the south, bounded by highlands to north, east, and west. Valley probably former glacial lake bed. Highlands in northwest part of town rise to 700 feet above sea level (a.s.l.), in southwest to 400 feet a.s.l. while valley floor at elevation of approximately 250 feet a.s.l. Glacially formed landscape left several hills in valley; some gneiss ledge exposed in northwest highlands, and generally well-drained soils suitable to grain and hay cultivation.

The Assabet River, flowing in north-west direction toward Concord River and later Merrimack River, provides major drainage for town. Along its banks were once found extensive tracts of good meadow. Four major brooks flow into the Assabet; two, Howard Brook and Cold Harbor Brook, join the Assabet at the town center. Southeast corner of town drains into Sudbury drainage basin.

Numerous bogs and marshes occur among the hills and along streams, sources of bog iron for early iron industry. Two natural ponds, Solomon and Little Chauncey, in eastern half of town.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Originally part of Marlborough grant of 1660. Set off with Westborough in 1717. Becomes second parish of Westborough in 1744. Established in 1766 from the northern part of Westborough as District of Northborough. Made a town in 1775.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

A suburban community on the historic corridor at the eastern edge of the central uplands, with possible native sites at Solomon and Little Chauncey ponds. Late 17th century settlement (1672) and mill site on "Licor Meadow Plain" soon abandoned. Rich intervalles and meadowlands attract permanent occupation in early 18th century. Meetinghouse site established 1746. Successful dispersed agricultural community, with commercial center developing by end of 18th century. Cotton and woolen manufacturing at Assabet River power site (Woodside) in 1814, and at Chapinville (1832) attracts Irish and French Canadian operations. Railroad connection in 1855 stimulates further institutional and commercial development of village center southeast of original meeting house site. East Main Street area retains mid 19th century scale. Late 19th century agriculture dominated by dairying and orcharding, with significant cluster of surviving poultry outbuildings in South Street/Thayer Street area. Extensive post-war suburban development, further stimulated by I-290 construction, continues to threaten remaining agricultural landscapes, particularly surviving Ball Hill orchards and South Street Federal farmsteads. Industrial development along peripheral rail corridors poses similar threats in these areas.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Primary route is Connecticut Path running east-west following Route 20, east-west Main Street. Alternative route branches to south as Davis-Thayer Street. Conjectured "old" Connecticut Path in southeast of town by Rocky Hill and Little Chauncey Pond near Lyman Street.

B. Settlement Patterns:

No known sites. Probably locations on mills near Assabet River and Solomon Pond.

C. Subsistence Patterns:

Probably seasonal fishing on Assabet and its tributaries, as well as Soloman and Little Chauncey Ponds.

D. Observations:

No information on this area but regional patterns suggest Nipmucks in low density seasonally exploiting freshwater resources, particularly ponds with large, more permanent camps located in other areas.

V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native Trails predominate with emphasis on and improvement of Connecticut Path.

B. Population:

Aboriginal diminished as praying towns gathered nearby. First colonial settler 1672, other grants at same time. Removal during King Philip's War.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Limited settlement at end of period from Marlborough, north of Mt. Assabet on "Licor Meadow Plain" and "along the Nipmuck Road ." Garrison house on West Main 'Street part of the Marlborough defense system. Sawmill on Howard Brook.

D. Economic Base:

Pasture and meadow tracts for Marlborough. Individuals taking up outlying farms adjacent to these resources.

E. Architecture:

John Brigham, reputed first settler, had a cabin and saw mill on "Licor Meadow" (now Mt. Assabet) in 1672.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Connecticut Path continues in importance as Post Road from Boston to Worcester. Rapid elaboration of road system with increasing settlement and regional town formation. Additional roads from meeting house to neighboring settlements: Howard-Green Streets and Newton-Whitney Streets to the north; Green Street to the northwest; Church Street to the west; South Street to the south; Rice Avenue to Soloman Pond in the east; and Whitney Street to the northeast. Secondary roads include Ball Street, West-Pleasant Streets, Brigham Street, Maple Street, and Bartlett Street.

B. Population:

Presumed diminished native population after King Philip's War. Increased settlement form Westborough primarily after 1713 and end of attacks connected with Queen Anne's War. Precinct status achieved in 1744 with families numbering 37. Sixty children die of "throat distemper" in 1749-50. By 1766 when established as district, family number has doubled though only half church members. Total 1765 is 594, in 1776 up to 798.

C. Settlement Patterns:

With reduction of frontier warfare residents of Westborough disperse to outlying farmstead. After much disagreement meeting house located 1746 near Post Road and confluence of Cold Harbor and Howard Brooks. Early mill development on Assabet River to the east of the meeting house. Burying ground on Brigham Street (1727) and later near meeting house (1746). Training field located between Church and Pleasant Street in 1738. Two taverns on Post Road. North school district of Westborough in 1726.

D. Economic Base:

Pasturage of cattle and sheep/goats, and hay meadows remain important; grain and orchard products. Grist mills on Assabet River (1720, 1749), Howard Brook (1766), and Cold Harbor Brook (1711). Fulling on Assabet by 1749, and iron foundry nearby by end of period; tannery on South Road by 1770. These attract business from neighboring upland towns.

E. Architecture;

Residential: The most common house type appears to have been the two-story frame central chimney form. Seven of these survive including the 1743 two-story, five-bay dwelling of Samuel Gamwell. Two examples of the two-story, five-bay frame double chimney form exist. Two one-story, central chimney houses are known from this period, one of which was raised to two stories in 1799.

Institutional: the first meeting house was raised in 1745 and

completed (interior treatment) in 1756. The 46' x 36' frame structure was described as having three doors, one each on the east, west, and south facades and having been painted a "dingy yellow".

Commercial: Munro's Tavern (on the site of the present Town Hall) dates from the late 18th century. The building exists today although much altered with the addition of a third floor, an ell, several wings, and a covering of asphalt siding.

Industrial: There are references to scattered mill sites along the various streams feeding into the Assabet River. Samuel Woods's Clothier Shop was established by the mid 18th century.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

The Colonial Road network remains in place, with a number of regional highways radiating from the center. Main Street (Post Road) remind the primary east-west roadway. the "New Hampshire Road" from Lancaster and Harvard passes the meeting house down South Street to Mendon and Providence. The road from Hubbardston/Princeton/Boylston enters the center from the northwest. The Boston-Worcester Turnpike (1810) passes through the southern tip of town.

B. Population:

A moderate gain in population over the period from 1776 (798) to 1820 (1018), with a slight decline (992) in 1830. Decade of greatest growth 1810-1820 (+222). Baptist Society formed 1828.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Most residential development took place along the Main Street and South Street corridors, with the greatest concentration of houses to the east and south of the emerging town center, southeast of the meeting house.

D. Economic Base:

Primarily agricultural economy, numerous water-power sites, and extensive system of roads from surrounding communities contributed to support of four gristmills and five sawmills by 1826. Presence of bog iron ore in numerous marshes fostered ironworks and limekiln (for flux) during 1780s; metalworking continued in small nailworks and scythe and hoe works into 1810s.

Textile industry had early presence in town. Fulling mill and clothier's shop dressed 7000 yards of cloth in 1793; by 1800 carding machines introduced; 1814 Northborough Mfg. Co. for cotton and woolen cloth and yarn erected, followed in 1832 with second manufactory and village. By 1837 two mills ran 1,820 spindles and produced 220,000 yards of cotton and woolen cloth, valued at

\$30,400. Textile machinery repair and manufacture begun 1823, lasted approximately 10 years.

Leather industry grew from late 18th century tannery and currying shop to include cottage and small shop boot and shoe manufacturing. By 1837 more than 75 persons employed in this trade producing more than 28,000 pairs of boots and shoes valued over \$30,000, many of which sold on southern market for slaves. Some early homework in palmleaf hat-making, declined by 1837.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Brick emerges as a building material, certainly influenced by the existence of brick yards in Northborough. The predominant house form is the two-story double chimney type with seven examples surviving, two end chimney houses are extant, one frame and one brick, both being five-bay, center-passage plans. Four one-story dwellings remain.

Institutional: Construction in this area increased with the erection of a new meeting house in 1808. The old meeting house was sold in 1809. The 56' x 56' building had a 34' x 15' projection on the south side and a tower with a Paul Revere bell. The first split with the traditional church came with the formation of the Baptist Society in 1827 followed by the construction of their church in 1828. In 1821, the secular side of government was physically removed from the meeting house with the construction of a separate town hall, 40' x 36' with a vestibule and gallery. The first Center School District building was erected in 1811. Private instruction had already been instigated with the formation of a seminary in 1780. That institution was dismantled in 1790 and its building in 1805.

Commercial: Little physical evidence of period commerce. Blake's Tavern (1830 map) joins Munro's, still operating from Colonial period.

Industrial: It is unlikely that many industrial structures survive from this period. Dr. Stephen Brooks' saw and grist mill on Hop Brook was operating in the early 1800s. Saw and grist mills were located on Stirrup and Cold Harbor Brooks.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

The early 19th century roads remain. Railroad line established to town center from Framingham in 1855 and through to Fitchburg in 1866.

B. Population:

Increase in population to 1855 (1602), then a slight rise and decline to 1870 (1504). Decade of greatest growth 1830-1840

(+256). Thirteen percent of population foreign-born in 1865. Evangelical Congregational Society formed 1832.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Furthur development of the Northborough commercial, residential and institutional center, under stimulus of railroad location, with linear development from Church Street east along Main Street to the small shops and factories along the Assabet River. Small industrial nucleations formed around the cotton and woolen mills at Woodside (after 1814) and Chapinville (after 1832) power sites on the Assabet River.

D. Economic Base:

Still primarily agricultural, though many small industries appeared. Boot and shoe manufacture in small shops and in homes continued; peaked in 1860s with value of goods produced of \$67,900 in 1865, disappeared by 1890s, probably due to rapid expansion of industry in Marlborough. Tanning and currying suffered similar fate; peaked 1855 with value of hides at \$45,000, ended by 1880s. Two textile mills in town suffered from economic slowdowns, closing, fires, Rifle manufacturing by David and Edwin Wesson, during 1840s later removed to Connecticut and joined with Horace Smith to form Smith and Wesson Co. Comb, jewelry, and button manufacturing from horn, bone, tortoise shell, and ivory was introduced in late 1830s, became leading industry by 1855 with numerous small shops and several small factories. Rise of this industry coincided with establishment of slaughter houses, bone meal/fertilizer mills, and soap factories. Introduction of Agricultural Branch Railroad in 1850s sustained these industries and stimulated orchards and dairying, with products of fruit, milk, butter, and meat sent to Boston. Woodworking industries such as manufacturer of carriages, sleighs, boxes, cabinetware, and pianofortes and organs appeared, causing increase in harvests of firewood, lumber, and charcoal. Several brickyard appeared in eastern end of town during 1830s and 1840s, one of which produced bricks for Lake Cochituate Waterworks (1846-48). A brick model house, still standing, was built in 1855 of bricks manufactured there. Economic and social leaders of town organized Northborough State Bank in 1854, the first in the area. In 1865 it became Northborough National Bank.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Northborough experienced its first major population increase in the first decades of this period, and this is reflected in all phases of building. Greek Revival two-story sidehall in all phases of building. Greek Revival two-story sidehall plans abound; most are frame but one brick example is recorded. Three and five-bay double chimney plans emerge as do some end chimney types. The side-hall plan declines in popularity in the Italianate period. Double chimney vernacular types remain popular. The unusual form is a 1 and 1/2-story stone, three-bay center-passage plan with Gothic dormers which may be an earlier structure that was remodelled during this period. Second Empire buildings appear during the latter portion of the period.

Institutional: Early in this period (1832), the Evangelical Congregational Church is formed and a meeting house is constructed the same year. This structure is abandoned and sold in 1847 when the congregation erects a gable end Greek Revival style building with a projecting pedimented pavillion of four engaged piers and a tower with spire. In 1848, the Unitarians remodel the second meeting house, adding another floor beneath the main body of the church and altering the fenestration on the side elevations. In 1860, the Baptists erect a new building on the site of the 1828 structure. This church (now the Northborough Historical Society Museum) is a 1 and 1/2-story frame nave plan building with quoins, a projecting central pavillion (the original steeple was destroyed by wind in 1938).

Several of the old district school buildings from the 1830s and 1840s exist. The third structures for the north (ca. 1841) and west (1847) districts are one-story gabled brick structures with flat stone lintels and entrances at the ends of the long walls. The 1837 Center District School building, later the Rubbi School and finally purchased by the Grange in 1895 when the district system was abolished, is a two-story, gable end brick structure with double doors in the gable end, flat lintels, and a copper-domed cupola. When built, the Center building was the most "pretentious" school house the town had ever erected.

The first fire station was built in 1847. In 1867, the town had outgrown its old Town Hall, and the present Second Empire structure was completed in 1868. The three-story brick building has a slate Mansard roof with bracketted cornice. Elongated double and triple windows with arched and pedimented hoods pierce the facade. Plans for the new Town Hall were submitted by E.R. Estey.

Commercial: The 1854 Northborough National Bank is on a one-story, three-bay brick gable front building with an Italianate canopy over the center entrance and a dentilled pediment.

The first depot was built in the 1850s following the advent of the railroad. Cyrus Gale's Greek Period gable end store is a 2 and 1/2 story frame structure with a one-story undercut Doric porch on the form (south) and west sides. The Chapinville General Store and Post Office now remodelled, as a residence, appears to have been a typical two-story gable end frame structure. The most significant commercial building from this period appears to have been the three-story Greek Assabet House, later Northborough Hotel (burned in 1920s). This six-bay frame structure had a full double porch across the facade, end chimneys and a two-story ell. The Northborough was a popular summer resort hotel for much of the 19th century.

Industrial: Mills and factories scattered along waterways, especially in town center. Factories at Chapinville and Woodside. Early (1830s) one-story brick mill houses at Davis Mill (Chapinville) and two-story gabled saw mill (ca. 1847) survive. The latter would appear to be typical to the period.

XI. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Road and rail system remains intact. By early 1900s street car routes are in place along Main Street to Westborough. In addition, a section of the Boston-Worcester line runs through the southern corner of town.

B. Population:

Overall increase in population from 1870 (1504) to 1900 (2104), with greatest increase in 1880s (+276), followed by decline to 1915 (1797). Foreign-born population in 1875 (88 Canadians, 69 Irish) increases by 1885 (154 French Canadians, 99 Irish), then remains stable through 1905. Catholic church established 1883.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Continued extension and infilling of linear village center along Main Street, with less intensive linear development along Hudson Street to Woodside and Chapinville.

D. Economic Base:

Economic diversification continued with introduction of several small manufactories for musical instruments, corset stitching, rubber and elastic goods, metals and metallic goods and cameras at the American Camera Mfg. Co. (1898).

Textile industry recovered to become major industry and employer in Northborough during 1880s and 1890s. Two mills and two clothing manufactories provided 3/4 of the town's 450 manufacturing jobs and nearly 9/10 of the value of goods manufactured during this period. Fires and economic difficulties left only the mill at Woodside operating by end of period.

Woodworking industries continued with manufactories of piano keys, boxes, carriages, and the building trades, as did the comb and fertilizer industries, which continued to employ nearly 100 persons through the early 1900s. However, general construction of industry, with only 8 manufacturing establishments in 1905 as opposed to 28 in 1880. Agriculture was still vital, Grange organized 1895.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Little recorded from this period; mostly popular Queen Anne and Colonial Revival forms constructed of frame. One major three-story Queen Anne dwelling with Colonial Revival detailing built between 1870-1887 east of the town center on rise, likely association with mill. Now a restaurant.

Institutional: The 1895 Hudson Street School is a two-story frame block with hipped roof and Colonial Revival details: abolished

district system, 1880. Factory School was erected for mill workers; children. 1883 St. Rose of Lima Roman Catholic Church, Patrick Ford of Boston, architect of frame Victorian Gothic nave plan structure with central entrance tower, belfry and short spire, rose window above entrance, buttresses (destroyed 1968). Northborough National Bank moved to three-story brick commercial block, First Northborough Library constructed in 1894 is a stone one-story, three-bay classical building with arched windows and doorway with pedimented entrance and Ionic pilasters.

Commercial: Nothing from this period. It would seem that most construction would have developed in town center in popular commercial style.

Industrial: Little documented. E.W. Chapin factory (1890s) represents typical four-story mill structure with centrally located tower.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Abandonment of trolley routes by 1930s and improvement of local highways as automobile roads. In the 1920s Main Street becomes part of the major east-west highway from Boston to Worcester and points west (old Route 5 - Yellowstone Trail; then Route 20). South Street (Route 135) is improved as the north - south road to Westborough. In 1930-1931 the old Boston-Worcester Turnpike in the southern corner of town is reconstructed as a four-lane auto turnpike (Route 9). At the same time, road construction alters Route 20, with a short cut-off on East Main Street, and a new southwest connection extending off West Main Street. The new intersection (1930) of Route 9/Route 20 is one of the earliest cloverleaves constructed in the state.

B. Population:

Population fluctuates slightly, but generally increases from 1915 (1797) to 1940 (2382), with greatest increase from 1930-1935 (+450).

C. Settlement Patterns:

Most growth around existing center and along radial roads. Some recreational cottage development on Bartlett Pond. Possible concentration of residents at Westborough State Hospital facility in southeast corner of town.

D. Economic Base:

Statistics are lacking. Textile industry remained major industry with one large woolen mill, Woodside, several smaller shoddy mills. Comb manufacturing continued of short while only. Among several new industries introduced were the manufacture of woven wire dynamo brushes, lamps and cash registers.

Agriculture continued to supply livelihood to many town residents; several gristmills continued in operation.

E. Architecture:

Early Modern period poorly documented in all categories. Field work essential to supplement 1938 modest Decon Fraser High School. Census figures indicate no significant population growth. 1928 one-story, four-bay brick firehouse, addition of two-bay police station in 1950s. 1809 Unitarian Church burns in 1950s and slightly smaller reconstruction executed by Perry Shaw and Hepburn.