

MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

DATE: 1984

COMMUNITY: Petersham

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Located in the central portion of Worcester County's western edge, Petersham consists of all of the former town of Dana, and parts of Greenwich and Prescott, as well as the original town of Petersham. The lands of the three towns represent those areas not flooded by Quabbin Reservoir during the late 1930s.

The town is drained by the East and West Branches of Fever Brook, the East Branch of the Swift River, and their tributaries, which all flow southwestward into the reservoir and the Swift River Valley. Much of the western portion of the town is presently controlled by the Metropolitan District Commission as watershed land and by state and private conservation groups. Running north-south through the town and separating the Swift River and Fever Brook valleys is a ridge of hills that rise to more than 1,200 feet above sea level; the river valleys cross the town between 700 and 900 feet above sea level. East of the Swift River the land rises again to more than 1,200 feet above sea level, while in the west the surface descends to below 600 feet above sea level along the shores of the Reservoir.

Petersham's soils consist largely of Gloucester series stony loams. An exception is a long strip of agriculturally important Charlton loams north and east of the center. The Gloucester loams, where cleared of stones, also yielded good crops of hay and grains. The stony areas, though cleared of forest, were most often used as pasture land. As a result, the town was an important dairying and cattle-raising area.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Six-mile-square "Nichewaug" or "Voluntown" grant made in 1733. Established as town of Petersham in 1754. New town of Dana formed in 1801 from parts of Petersham, Greenwich (incorporated 1754), and Hardwick (incorporated 1739). Part of Petersham and Hardwick annexed to Dana and Prescott annexed to Petersham with creation of Quabbin Reservoir, 1927.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Petersham is a highland residential community, with large reservoir, watershed management, and forestry areas. It is located primarily within the upper Swift River drainage, along the historic east-west Sunderland Road corridor from Lancaster to the Connecticut River Valley. Native sites are reputed to exist at Soapstone Hill, Pottapaug Pond (now flooded), and other locations, and evidence of planting field occupancy has been claimed for

Nichewaug (Carter) Hill and other hilltop areas. First European settlement of Nichewaug Plantation occurred ca. 1733 as Volunteers Town or Voluntown Grants to Indian War veterans, with meetinghouse site established by ca. 1735. Settlement of Voluntown was delayed by its situation as a fortified, frontier outpost during the French War, but dispersed agricultural occupation followed the cessation of hostilities, leading to the incorporation of Petersham in 1754.

Prosperous late 18th and early 19th century agricultural development of cattle, orchard, and grain production led to the development of a small meetinghouse center village. Local support for Shays' Rebellion appears to have been strong, and the arrival of a group of Shakers in 1783 was met by mob violence. The southwest area separated from Petersham, Greenwich, and Hardwick in 1801 as the town of Dana, with local meetinghouse focus at Dana Center. Small-scale 19th century development of wooden ware and textile industries occurred on the Swift River and Swift River East Branch, with the main local center at North Dana, and a secondary cluster at Nichewaug (Factory Village) in Petersham. Palm-leaf hat production and soapstone quarrying were other local 19th century industries. Railroad connections came late, with the establishment of the Springfield-Athol line along the Swift River corridor through North Dana in 1873. Agricultural abandonment and population decline persisted through the late 19th and early 20th century.

Some development of Petersham Center as a summer resort took place by the early 1900s, and Harvard Forestry School was established in the northeast in 1908. The initiation of the Quabbin Reservoir project in the 1920s led to the displacement of the entire population of the town of Dana, and all buildings and cemeteries were removed by the time of the flooding of the Swift River Valley in 1930-40. Removal of much of the settlement at Nichewaug in Petersham also occurred, and tracts of land in western Petersham were designated watershed areas, or state forest. Some modern suburban development has extended into town from Athol to the north. While relatively few agricultural landscapes remain intact, a good assortment of vernacular 18th and 19th century survive in the northern and eastern quarters. Petersham Center retains much of its mid-19th century character, and the town's historic fabric persists as part of the esthetic environment of a high-income, exurban community.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes

Highland East Swift River tributary area between Millers River (north) and Ware River (south) corridors. North-south trail from Millers River (Athol) past Potopoug Pond (now part of Quabbin Reservoir) in the southwest to Juddy Brook corridor (Hardwick) conjectured on Doe Valley Road-Athol Road-Hardwick Road-Old Hardwick Road-Hardwick Road. Alternative route over Nichewaug

(now Carter) Hill inferred on Glen Valley Road-Nichewaug Road. Southwest branch past Potopoug Pond to west side of Muddy Brook Corridor conjectured as following contours and abandoned roadways. Eastern trail (East Street) conjectured from Ware River area (Old Barre Road) and Burnshirt River (East Street). Possible northwest-southeast connector trail along Shaw Road.

B. Settlement Pattern

The formation of the Quabbin Reservoir has disrupted the drainage system and covered likely Swift River Valley sites. Currently reported sites, though of unknown cultural origin, are located on knolls adjacent to the remaining branches and flooded portions of the river, and many more sites, similarly located, should be expected in this area. The confluence of the branches probably provided a gathering point for larger numbers for fishing and planting, while the adjacent areas were occupied by smaller task and family groups.

C. Subsistence Pattern

Small family and task groups visited the area seasonally for resource exploitation through hunting and fishing, as well as larger, and more long-term, occupation at the Swift River branch confluences.

V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes

Contact period trails continue in use.

B. Settlement Pattern

The location of this area between the primary areas of native and colonial settlement to the south, east, and west meant that contact was secondary. Some depopulation probably resulted from the epidemic of the 1630s in the Connecticut River Valley. Continuation of patterns established during the Contact period.

C. Subsistence Pattern

A continuation of patterns established during the Contact period.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes

Native trail improved as Sunderland Road from Lancaster ca. 1734 through "Voluntown" (East Street-West Street). Northwest branch improved as road to Orange (Shaw Road-Swamp Road). East Street is connected to improved road to Barre (Old Barre Road). Meetinghouse site is established by ca. 1738, and north-south road is improved from Hardwick past meetinghouse to Athol (Hardwick

Road-Old Hardwick Road-Hardwick Road-Athol Road). Northeast road established to Templeton (Popple Camp Road). Other secondary routes connect outlying farms to the meetinghouse center.

B. Population

Settlers were in the town by 1736, when occasional preaching began, and in 1738 a church was formed by 15 men. A petition of 1750 named 47 of 61 household heads in residence. By 1765 the total population equalled 707 in over twice as many families, and grew further to 1,235 in 1776. Most proprietors came from western Middlesex and eastern Worcester counties, but the settlers came from many surrounding towns also. By the end of the period, the Loyalist posture of the town's minister was beginning to cause friction in the town.

C. Settlement Pattern

The area now Petersham was, primarily, granted to Bennet, Perley, et al. in 1732 in return for their service under Lovell and White in frontier combat in the 1720s. Forty of the 71 proprietors in this group can be traced to Lovell's final expedition, but few actually settled on the land. They divided the land into homelots the following year, 50 acres each, and located the meetinghouse near what was then the geographical center of the town. The southern portion of the present town, including the Quabbin Reservoir segments, was at this time the western section of Hardwick and the eastern portion of Greenwich. Dispersed farmsteads characterized the settlement of the entire area.

Garrisons or fortified houses were located in the town as protection from repeated frontier warfare.

D. Economic Base

The town was classified as commercial in 1771 by Pruitt, an anomaly easily explained by the town's remoteness and age. High propertylessness is probably related to late settlement, and in turn affected the corn yield, with high figures per farmer. The remaining categories are comparable to neighboring towns' rankings as poor agrarian towns with low commercial development, very low community wealth, moderate agrarian prosperity, and low agrarian poverty.

E. Architecture

Residential: Oldest known building is a single-story, gambrel roofed, three-bay, center chimney dwelling (Gay House, 1740, NR). Three other single-story, center chimney houses and ten two-story, center chimney plans are recorded. No other building type is recorded for the period.

Institutional: First meetinghouse constructed between 1733 and 1736, measured 40 x 50 feet.

Commercial: Reference to Thomas Carter's inn in 1733.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes

Additions to the colonial road network include the stage route from Worcester northwest to Vermont (Loring Hill Road-Russell Road-Nichewaug Road)--a more direct connector between Barre and Petersham centers. The Petersham, Greenwich, and Monson Turnpike, promoted by Norwich, Connecticut interests, is incorporated in 1804 and built ca. 1809, with route south from Athol across the west part of Petersham and the northwest part of Dana (Turnpike Road). Roads are focused toward Dana Center (including Barre-Dana Road) after Dana is incorporated in 1801.

B. Population

The area's population continued to expand during this period. In Petersham, the total grew from 1,235 in 1776 to 1,794 in 1800; the figures for the combined towns, after the formation of Dana, continued to grow to 2,115 in 1810, thereafter the pace slowing to reach 2,319 in 1830.

In Petersham, the disagreements between the Tory minister and the parish increased until he was dismissed in 1777. Some members of the town began worshipping with the Baptists in the south where the minister was a Whig. In 1783 the Shakers visited the town and Dana, attracting some followers but meeting mob violence as they had in other towns they visited. In 1802, the new covenant of the First Parish displayed Unitarian sentiments, and in 1823 a group of 16 formed an Orthodox Congregational Church. In 1824 the Baptists became a branch of the Athol church. In Dana, Hosea Ballou first preached the doctrine of Universalism from 1797, followed by his successor Flagg. Baptists met in the center from 1800-25. Itinerant Methodists visited the town, later forming a class.

The town was to be a shiretown when attempts were made early in the period to form a county from northern Worcester towns and some from another county. The Shays men retreated here to gather more troops during the Rebellion, and were surprised by Lincoln and his troops and were dispersed.

C. Settlement Pattern

A second meetinghouse is built at Petersham Center in 1788, and a small cluster develops west of the meetinghouse by the early 19th century, including a hotel, and some linear residential extensions on Main (Hardwick) Street and West Street. An Orthodox meetinghouse is built to the north on Main Street (Athol Road) in 1829.

