

MHC RECONAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

Date: 1983

Community: Southbridge

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Southbridge is located in the southwestern corner of Worcester County just to the north of the Connecticut border. Its surface consists of a series of parallel north-south ridges in the western 2/3 of the town, with less defined, lower hills and ridges in the eastern 1/3. This topographical difference also marks a change from Brookfield series soils in the western portion to Charlton series soils in the eastern area. Elevations range from more than 1,000 feet above sea level in the south and southwest to 600-700 feet above sea level on the north and east borders.

Cutting a narrow, steep sided valley through the north central portion of the town is the Quinebaug River. The drop in elevation of more than 100 feet as the river winds approximately five miles through the town in a southwestern direction provided a number of good water power sites, as did its several tributary streams.

Both the Brookfield and Charlton series loams, ranging from stony to fine loams, are valuable lands for agriculture. The best of the loams, when cleared for cultivation or left for pasture, are also fairly productive.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Poll parish of "Honest Town" created from parts of Charlton, Dudley, and Sturbridge, 1801. Incorporated as Town of Southbridge from parts of Charlton, Dudley, and Sturbridge, 1816. Part of Dudley annexed 1822. Part of Sturbridge annexed 1839. Bounds with Sturbridge established 1871. Bounds with Charlton and Dudley established 1907.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Urban-industrial center on the Quinebaug River corridor, with native sites possible at river falls areas. First European settlement probably ca. 1733, with Moses Marcy mills. Dispersed 18th century agricultural settlement as peripheral area of Sturbridge, Charlton, and Dudley. Early 19th century textile manufacturing of several Quinebaug River power sites, with major industrial concentration at Globe Village, and commercial/institutional core at Southbridge Center. Commercial and industrial growth further stimulated by 1866 railroad connection, with major late 19th century industrial development by American Optical at Lensdale, and central commercial district growth. Immigrant labor population includes large proportion of French Canadians. Variety of 19th century worker housing and residential districts remain intact. Sustained American Optical growth appears to have maintained local economic base and impact of post-war development/deterioration on historic urban landscape appears relatively light.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes

Quinebaug River corridor through steep highland ridge and valley belt, with transport foci at river fords. Primary east-west trail conjectured north of river (Reynolds Road-Guelphwood Road-Charlton Street-Paige Hill Road-Main Street). Quinebaug corridor trail south of river (River Road). North-south trail to Woodstock from Westville ford to Elm Street-Lebanon Hill Road.

B. Settlement Pattern

No sites of any cultural period are reported for the town but the presence of the Quinebaug River as well as upland ridges indicates high potential for a variety of site types. Adjacent to the river, particularly at its falls, and on the banks of ponds to the south-west, fishing sites are expected. In the hilly areas, hunting and other small scale sites should exist.

C. Subsistence Pattern

The seasonal round form larger base camps brought Native Americans to this area to hunt and fish.

V. Plantation Period (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes

Native trails continue in use, with the main north-south route becoming the path from the settlement at Woodstock to that at Brookfield, and the east-west trail becoming part of the route from Boston to Springfield.

B. Settlement Pattern

Patterns of land use established by the Native population in the Contact period are presumed to have continued during the Plantation period are presumed to have continued during the Plantation period. Some reduction is expected due to increased colonial presence and the formation of praying towns. No colonial settlement.

C. Subsistence Pattern

The seasonal exploitation of resources in the town continued during this period.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes

Trails and early roads are improved as local roads from dispersed farmstead to Sturbridge. Centers in Dudley, Charlton.

B. Population

No figures are available for this period.

C. Settlement Pattern

This area was settled late in the period from the three towns which contributed territory when the area became a parish during the Federal Period. The major portion was granted as part of Sturbridge in 1738 and settled thereafter. Smaller portions were part of Charlton (1754) and Dudley (1731). In addition to the gradual establishment of dispersed farmsteads, the Quinebaug River mill sites attracted settlement, prior to official incorporation. BY 1761 the area was made a school district of Sturbridge.

D. Economic Base

The high quality of Quinebaug mill sites attracted development prior to official settlement, in the 1730s by Moses Marcy. The soils here were reported in the 19th century as superior to those of Sturbridge and suited to dairying.

E. Architecture

Residential: Settlement by second quarter of 18th century, but few recorded survivals/examples; one single-story, five-bay, center chimney plan recorded.

Institutional: First school building erected in 1754.

Commercial: Early saw and grist mills by 1730s.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes

Roads on the south side of the river are improved, particularly between the center and Globe Village (Main Street). Colonial roadways continue to be used.

B. Population

By 1796, population reached numbers sufficient to generate interest in independent status as town or parish. In 1798 there were 72 taxpayers in the Sturbridge portion, 23 in the Dudley and 20 in the Charlton. The petition of 1800 was signed by 87 men, and when incorporated included 90 men. The formation was unusual in its organization by individuals rather than territory, remedied in 1808 when the later owners and occupants of the estates were ordered to act as the original petitioners in parish affairs. In 1814 when petition was made for the town, 177 men signed it. The total population in 1820 equalled 1,066, and in 1830, 1,444.

Just as the town was unusual in its poll parish status, its initial church formation was non-traditional. Acknowledging the

