

# MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

ACTON

Report Date: 1980

**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](http://www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc)

[mhc@sec.state.ma.us](mailto:mhc@sec.state.ma.us) / 617-727-8470

## MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

DATE: March, 1980

COMMUNITY: Acton

### I. TOPOGRAPHY

Located on rugged upland terrain. Many areas of exposed bedrock but reshaped by glacial scouring and outwash action. Gravelly to rocky soil. A few upland ponds, several areas of bog/swamp between more prominent elevations. All drainage is south via two major brooks, Nashoba and Fort Pond, into Assabet River.

### II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES:

Part of Concord "New Grant" 1655. Referred to as "Concord Village" during late 17th and early 18th centuries. Numerous boundary disputes, especially over NE corner (Willard Farm). Incorporated as Town of Acton, 1735. Part of NE corner ceded to Carlisle, 1730.

### III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Suburban industrial town on fringe of metropolitan Boston. Located on edge of central highlands with tributaries to the Concord River. Corridor of regional trails to interior with local native sites around Nagog Pond and Fort Pond Brook. Early axis of settlement from Concord during mid-17th century with mill sites along Nashoba Brook, and wood supply for Concord iron works at South Acton by early 18th century. Some surviving First Period houses in original settings along Colonial highways. Town center formation by mid-18th century creates village center at Acton with local involvement at Battle of Concord preserving several related Colonial period houses. Well-preserved Federal period mill sites remain along Nashoba Brook with original sluiceways. Agricultural economy continues on limited valley land through 19th century with industrial development at South Acton mill sites spurred with connection along Boston railroad. Local village center contains well-preserved range of Victorian period buildings around Colonial sites, including period bridges. Acton center also retains mid-19th century civic buildings after local fire destroys Colonial center. Restricted development through early 20th century with subcenters along railroad at East Acton, North Acton and West Acton. containing a variety of vernacular structures. Recent expansion of suburban development from Boston has overwhelmed historic period landscapes along original highway corridors, although village centers retain authentic character.

### IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

#### A. Transportation Routes:

Located on the edge of the central highlands at the headwaters of the Assabet River and Nashoba Brook. Conjectured trail routes follow western corridors from Concord River as Law-School-Central-Summer Streets along Fort Pond Brook through S. Acton with possible branches south along Liberty Street and north along Central Street (W. Acton). A second major trail

follows Nashoba Brook to Nagog Pond along Great Road (Route 2A) with possible loops at Esterbook and Davis Roads, with likely branches along Strawberry Hill and Main Street-Carlisle Road.

B. Settlement Pattern:

No documented period sites reported. Unspecified sites on Nashoba and Fort Pond Brooks. Artifacts also reported SE of Great Hill and from the Strawberry Hill area (Phalen, 1954, p. 3). Other likely site locations include well drained terraces and knolls overlooking Assabet, major brooks and Nagog Pond.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Seasonal fish runs in Assabet and major tributaries; Nagog and Fort Ponds both spawning areas. Limited agriculture, plus upland hunting and gathering.

D. Observations:

Though little information available, a likely area for Nipmuck-related sites.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails remain as primary highways with possible improvement of Great Road (Route 2A) along Nashoba Brook to Nagog Pond during 17th century.

B. Population:

Very small, less than half-dozen colonial families.

C. Settlement:

A few scattered farms toward end of period: John Law, 1656 (School Street); John Shepard, about 1660 (Hosmer Street); Thomas Wheeler, 1669 (near Nashoba Brook).

D. Economic Base:

Pasturing sheep and cattle from Concord plus subsistence level agriculture. Thomas Wheeler's grist mill on Nashoba Brook, 1670. Iron work farm, from 1660--woodlot and charcoal production for iron industry in West Concord.

E. Observations:

One of the initial westward thrusts out of Concord into the highland plateau region.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Primary roads remain from 17th century along Nashoba and Fort Pond Brooks. Formation of town center in mid-18th century creates radial pattern of highways

from Acton meetinghouse as Main, Nagog Hill-Concord, Newtown and Hayward Roads with original segment of Strawberry Hill Road intact near Brook Street. Network of roads formed along Assabet in South Acton during Colonial period as High and Parker Streets to mill site.

B. Population:

Slow growth until end of 17th century, more rapid expansion after end of Queen Anne's War (1714). Census of 1765 listed 611 inhabitants, 100 families and 96 houses. Census of 1776 listed 769 inhabitants.

C. Settlement:

Two loci of development prior to incorporation: area along Great Road around Wheeler's mill (East Acton), and around the road intersections and mills on Fort Pond Brook (South Acton). In addition, many scattered farms throughout the town, especially along brook villages. After incorporation, compromise location chosen for town center, Main Street and Nagog Hill Road (Acton). First meetinghouse built, 1738. (Woodland cemetery, 1737), First town school, 1771. Remained a diffused town since new center did not become a focus for additional development.

D. Economic Base:

Quite diverse. Agriculture and grazing, apple orchards, seasonal lumbering. By mid-18th century, coopering an important activity. A variety of milling activities: Joseph Harris's iron foundry and forge by 1697 (East Acton) as well as several (up to four) grist/saw mills on Nashoba Brook; Jones's/Knight (Faulkner's) grist, saw and fulling mills built between 1701 and 1707 (South Acton) as well as new iron works, 1707-1722. Several taverns: Samuel Jones, 1750 (South Acton); White's, 1755 (on Great Road); and Brooks's, 1760 (Acton).

E. Architecture

Residential:

Central-chimney, two-story houses were by far the most widespread house type built during the period, followed by a far smaller number of central-chimney Cape Cod cottages, some of which may postdate 1775. Little high-style was present except, perhaps, for entry surrounds put on vernacular house types. Only one gambrel roofed structure is known to have existed.

F. Observations:

Developed during 18th century from an extension of Concord into a fairly prosperous and self-sufficient rural town.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Colonial highways remain from 18th century. Union Turnpike (1806) from Concord crosses through central town to West Acton along main western corridor (Routes 2 and 111). Original stone arch bridge of possible 18th century date survives across Fort Pond in South Acton.

B. Population:

Gradual increase throughout period except for small decline between 1800 and 1810; no foreign-born population believed present. Universalists present, c. 1814, society organized 1816-1821.

C. Settlement Location:

Mainly scattered farmsteads with fewer than six houses at Acton Center prior to 1807; small village developed at center after 1807, small villages begun at West and South Acton toward end of period.

D. Economic Base:

Primarily agricultural economy, fruits and vegetables, supplemented by coopering and small cottage industry in boot and shoe making. 3 grist mills and 4 saw mills by 1821.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Vernacular types of the preceding period probably remained popular for new construction until c. 1810; after which the rear-wall chimney two-story house plan associated with Federalist architecture became the dominant local house type; a much smaller number of twin-chimney houses and rear-wall chimney cottages were also built. Late Georgian decorative details remained in use at least as late as 1801 and probably until c. 1810-1815, when simple Federalist style doorways and decorative trim came into use. At least one, and possibly two, attempts at formal, high-style design exist at Acton Center where two apparently Federalist period houses have facade windows grouped in such a way as to give the impression of a central pavillion, on one of these houses, this grouping may even reflect an earlier (late Georgian) attempt at high-style.

Institutional:

Federalist style meetinghouse constructed for First Parish (1807), Universalist meetinghouse built (?) c. 1816-1821. Five school districts declared, 1790, reduced to 4 districts in 1800; 5 school houses built or remodelled, 1796-1798; some brick school houses built in 1820 (?).

Commercial:

Tavern/inn in operation at town center; public houses on major through routes; no information available regarding stores, probable location would have been town center.

Industrial:

Grist and saw mills in operation; small scale wood-frame workshops for boot and shoe making after c. 1815.

## VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

### A. Transportation Routes:

Turnpike and highways remain from early 19th century. Fitchburg railroad (1844) from Boston follows western axis along Fort Pond Brook through South and West Acton with branch to Maynard (1849), now abandoned. Impressive stone arch bridge carries railroad over Fort Pond Brook, South Acton. Secondary railroad follows north from Concord along Nashoba Brook (1871) to North Acton.

### B. Population:

Rapid increase in population between 1840 and 1860 followed by a small decline between 1860 and 1870; small foreign-born population made up mostly of Irish immigrants after c. 1845; Methodists present during period but no congregation formed; Evangelical Congregational Society formed, 1832 (Acton Center), Baptist Society organized 1846.

### C. Settlement Location:

Major new growth in villages of South and West Acton, small village developed at East Acton (Ellsworth) and small expansion at the periphery of Acton Center.

### D. Economic Base:

Established powdermills, 1835, on Assabet River--this dominated industrial activity of Acton for succeeding century. Home industry in boot and shoe making peaks at annual production of \$43,000 in 1865. Pencil factory built on Nashoba Brook.

### E. Architecture:

#### Residential:

Late Federalist house-types probably continued to be built 1830-1840; subsequent styles are represented by a small number of Greek Revival style houses and by a larger number of Italianate style houses. Most examples are side-hall plan two-story houses, followed by a smaller number of side-hall plan cottages. More formal decorative details and some variety of plans are found on the major roads leading in and out of West Acton and South Acton. No fully developed high-style appears to have been built; elements of Carpenter Gothic style were limited to individual pieces of decorative trim.

#### Institutional:

Late Federal style, brick-end Chapel built for the Evangelical Congregational Society (1832-33), replaced by a Greek Revival style church (1847); Italianate style alterations made 1867. Baptist Church built 1846, replaced 1853-54 (Italianate style?); Universalist Chapel built at West Acton, 1858 (Italianate style). Six school districts created 1830, at least one new school house built 1839 other one-room school houses probably built during period. Memorial obelisk built at Acton Center, 1851; Italianate style town hall built 1863.

Commercial:

Wood-frame hotel, shoe shop and other buildings at Acton Center (destroyed by fire 1862); two-story wood-frame commercial blocks with gabled facades built at West Acton (after 1837) and at South Acton, mostly of late Greek Revival/Italianate design. Large wood-frame Italianate style block built as dry goods store and public hall, 1860-70 (South Acton). Railroad depots built at East, West, North and South Acton.

Industrial:

Varied manufacturing and milling, probably carried on in astylic wood-frame structures (2 and 3-stories high) at South and West Acton. Scattered small-scale shoe shops and coopering shops probably ceased use after c. 1855-1870.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Rail and road system intact from mid-19th century. Streetcar route from Maynard to South Acton in early 1900s along Main Street (Route 27) with original truss bridge over railroad (1906) and extended branch to West Acton along Central Street with private way still intact near Fort Pond Brook.

B. Population:

Gradual increase in population to c. 1900, thereafter it fluctuated in 2,098-2,151 range; foreign-born population made up of Irish, Nova Scotians (who became largest single group after c. 1895), Italians (after c. 1900) and Norwegians (c. 1905-1910). Universalist Society orgnized at South Acton, 1870; Universalist Society reorgnized at West Acton, 1876-78; Congregational Society organized at South Acton c. 1876; Roman Catholics present c. 1900, chapel organized 1913.

C. Settlement Location:

Little expansion of settled area, except at the periphery of West and South Acton.

D. Economic Base:

Principal period of growth for both West Acton and South Acton. Food storage lockers in West Acton built 1870s and after (one still extant); wooden ware factory of E. Hall; and apple products. In South Acton, piano stool factory, and Wool Shoddy mill both built along River Street. George Conant developed a method of marketing laundry bluine nationwide in West Acton.

E. Architecture

Residential:

As in preceding period most new houses were of side-hall plan, both one and two-stories, styles represented include late Italianate, Queen Anne,

a small amount of Colonial Revival and possibly some Bungalows. Several wood-frame rows of workers' housing may have been built c. 1870-75 at West Acton. High-style/ambitious architecture of the period is restricted to several examples each of Second Empire, Victorian Gothic, Queen Anne and Bungalow styles, almost all located at the peripheries of West and South Acton, of these the Second Empire style houses are by far the most lavish and fully developed examples of their styles.

Institutional:

Victorian Gothic style church (Universalist) built at South Acton, 1878; Queen Anne style church (Congregational) built at South Acton, 1891-92; Queen Anne style alterations to Evangelical Congregational Society, 1898; late Gothic Revival chapel (Catholic) built at West Acton, 1913; late Gothic style chapel built at Woodlawn Cemetery c. 1910-25 (?). Romanesque Revival style library built 1889; 1871-73 3 wood-frame Italianate style school houses with several rooms each, built at Acton Center, South Acton and West Acton; public schools graded and consolidated into 3 central schools, c. 1891-95; high school instituted c. 1891-93. Public halls built for G.A.R., 1893, and I.O.O.F., 1905.

Commercial:

Limited construction of wood-frame commercial buildings at South and West Acton.

Industrial:

Brick, utilitarian construction used at Powder Mills (?), elsewhere wood-frame utilitarian construction likely to have been built. At least one brick cold storage building, West Acton.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Street railway routes abandoned in 1920s with regional autohighways along Colonial roads as Route 2 (now 2A) along Great Road, Route 111 (Massachusetts Avenue-turnpike) and Route 27 (Main Street) through Acton center. Route 2 extened as superhighway (1950) around West Acton with interchange at Route 27.

B. Population:

Gradual increase in population after 1920; no new religious societies recorded in secondary sources.

C. Settlement Location:

Densest new construction in the vicinity of South Main Street (South Acton) and Central Street (West Acton).

D. Economic Base:

American Powder Mills flourished during World War I, with sales to Russia.



Small machine shop (William Tenney) and metal parts manufacturer (F. Lothrop, South Acton). Agricultural products continued to be shipped to area markets.

E. Architecture

Residential:

With the possible exception of one or two bungalows at West Acton, no high-style seems to have been built during period. Examples of bungalow style and Colonial Revival style consist mainly of cottages and some modest two-story houses. Some wood-frame row houses may have been built at West Acton during this period.

Institutional:

New high school built 1925-26 (Colonial Revival style?), central school built c. 1930 (?).

Commercial:

Development mainly at West Acton consisting of rebuilding of existing store fronts and the construction of at least one two-story brick block, 1922 (eclectic style).

XI. SOURCES

Acton Historical Society, A Brief History of Acton (1974)  
Phalen, Harold, History of the Town of Acton (1954)