

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

ASHBY

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.



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
mhc@sec.state.ma.us / 617-727-8470

MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

DRAFT

DATE: 1984

COMMUNITY: Ashby

I. TOPOGRAPHY

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Part included in Turkey Hills grant of 1719, and part in Dorchester Canada grant of 1735. Northern boundary established by Province Line of 1741. Established as a town in 1767, from parts of Ashburnham, Fitchburg, and Townsend. Part of Ashburnham annexed in 1792. Part of Fitchburg annexed in 1829.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Rural, residential hill town east of Mount Watatic on highland corridors to the northwest along Willard Brook. Native sites are possible at Wright Ponds (Neesepegesuck), Watatic Pond, and Damon Pond. Site of three mid-18th century garrisons in peripheral area of Lunenburg (later Fitchburg), Townsend, and Dorchester Canada (later Ashburnham), with fatalities from native attack in 1748. Continued threat of native hostilities delays permanent European settlement to ca. 1750. An early mill is established on Locke Brook in the northeast in 1750, and the meetinghouse site is determined by 1769. Small early German population is part of Dutch Farms settlement in Dorchester Canada. Dispersed, upland agricultural settlement continues into the early 19th century, with the development of a linear, Federal turnpike village at the meetinghouse center, and a milling hamlet (South Village) on Willard Brook to the south. Center village growth continues into the mid 19th century, but little other 19th century development occurs. Modern suburban growth from Fitchburg has concentrated in the south and east, but exurban pressures on northern hilltop sites with views of Watatic and the Monadnock Region is probable. Scattered agricultural landscapes remain, with representative 18th and early 19th century farmhouses. Ashby Center survives intact as an early 19th century turnpike village, while South Village retains important elements of a small milling focus.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes

Highland Willard Brook tributary area, with east-west corridor to Watatic Pond (County Road-Main Street-Rindge State Road-Flint Street) conjectured Trapfall Brook loop on Foster Road-Mason Road-Ipswich Road. Northwest routes conjectured on West Road-Bennett Road, and New Ipswich Road-Simmonds Road-Heywood Road-Robbins Road. Conjectured southern east-west route on Taylor Road-Old Northfield Road-Richardson Road, with northeast connector on Piper Road-Nourse Road-abandoned way to County Road.

B. Settlement Pattern

Like so many of the towns in the northern part of Central Massachusetts, no archaeological sites are reported. The area is primarily upland, watered primarily by small brooks, south, Trapfall, and several unnamed. In addition, the area is near the border of traditional Nipmuck and the eastern Massachusetts tribal territories. These factors combine to indicate very low density of occupation, consisting of short-term visits, primarily for winter hunting.

C. Subsistence Pattern

Groups came to this area for seasonal hunting, within a system of moving out from base camps, probably located near Lancaster to the south.

V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes

Contact period trails continue in use.

B. Settlement Pattern

Probable continuation of earlier patterns with some reduction due to colonial presence to the east and south.

C. Subsistence Pattern

Probable continuation of Contact period patterns.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes

The reputed route of the Northfield Road (1733) with eastern origins in Lunenburg, passes over the southern hills and between Wright Ponds (Taylor Road-Old Northfield Road-Richardson Road-Piper Road-Russell Hill Road). Other early main roads include two routes northwest into New Hampshire: Wheeler-Heywood-Simonds-New Ipswich Roads and County Road-Main Street-West Road-Bennett Road through the Meetinghouse Center. Secondary local roads connect the Center (ca. 1769) with outlying farms.

B. Population

Few figures are available for the town at this time; 43 household heads were taxed in 1768. By 1775 the total population equalled 422. The town did not gather a church until 1776.

C. Settlement Pattern

The area now Ashby was made a parish from the neighboring towns of Townsend, Fitchburg, and Ashburnham in 1764. First settlers came

to the eastern Townsend, portion. Fortified houses were located in the northeast, near Locke Road, at the center, and a third unknown spot. The meetinghouse and cemetery land, near the geographic center of the town, was purchased from private owners in 1770 and 1771, totalling 4 acres. No land divisions were held, as there was none held in common. Dispersed settlement of farms was the general pattern.

D. Economic Base

Due to late incorporation date, little information is available. The town is classified by Pruitt as a Poor Agrarian Town for 1771, like most north central Massachusetts. Its corn production was low, bringing low agricultural prosperity and community wealth. Commercial development remained low, as did propertylessness. Few waterways provided power sites for the town; the first mill was located on Locke Brook in the northeast part of the town.

E. Architecture

Residential: Very few period houses known to exist. One two-story, five-bay, center chimney plan is recorded and a late single-story, center chimney house. One dwelling observed in field may be a period two-story, five-bay, double chimney plan.

Institutional: First meetinghouse (30 x 40 feet) erected in 1770.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes

The colonial roadways continue in use, with the addition of the Ashby Turnpike (incorporated 1806, opened 1811) from Keene through Rindge and Ashby to Groton, and passing through Ashby Center (Rindge State Road-Main Street-Turnpike Road). A road is also established from Fitchburg to the Center (State Road-Main Street).

B. Population

The population grew rapidly during this period, tripling during the 55 years, from 422 in 1776 to 1,240 in 1830. Just three years after the church was formed, doctrinal differences developed between the town and its minister leading to his dismissal in 1783; for 14 years the town was without a minister, and the congregation was calm for many years. By the 1810s, however, the town developed the common differentiation between an Arminian parish and a Calvinist church which led to the withdrawal of the latter, 100 in number, in 1819 to form a moderate Calvinist church.

C. Settlement Pattern

The Meetinghouse Center develops as the town's commercial and residential focus, particularly after the 1811 turnpike opening. The second Congregational Meetinghouse is built in 1809, and an Orthodox church is added in 1820. The heaviest residential concentration is along Main Street east of the civic focus with

other linear extensions west on Main Street, north on New Ipswich Road, and south on South Road. Elsewhere, dispersed upland agricultural settlement continues, and a secondary concentration occurs at the South Road mill site (South Ashby).

D. Economic Base

A high proportion of the town's land was unimproved or woodlot at this time, 70.4%, while an additional 16.5% classified as unimprovable. A low percentage, 1.6%, was under tillage, a moderate amount was in pasturage, 7.9%, and 3.6% in meadow and mowing land.

E. Architecture

Residential: A significant number of houses survive from this period, probably reflecting the increase in population during the period. All those recorded and observed were of two stories. Center and double chimney plans were popular. In addition, a significant number of rearwall chimney plans are also evident. End chimney houses occur with some frequency, including two brick double pile plans. Rearwall chimney plans generally have hipped roofs.

Institutional: The second meetinghouse was erected in 1809 on the site of the first and is a two-story, gable end structure with a three-bay projecting central tower. This building became the Unitarian church in 1821. The first Congregational church was built in 1820 and is probably the two-story, three-bay gable end structure on the east side of the common with the Federal fanlight (this building was moved to its present location in the late 19th century).

The district #1 school was erected in the Center in 1785.

Commercial: The tavern of Abijah Wyman (1795) is a two-story, eight-bay structure with two interior chimneys..

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes

The early 19th century roads continue in use. No railroad connections are established through the town.

B. Population

After a brief experience of growth early in the century, the total population figure fell during this period, from 1,240 in 1830 to 994 in 1870. The town is unusual in the small impact of manufacturing, with only 50 males so employed during this period. Foreign-born citizens were also few in the town, under 50 through the period, and accounting for under 3% of the population; Irish and Canadians were included in this group. The town had an academy between 1840 and 1860; its library became the basis for

the town's free and public library. Philomath's Dramatic Association was formed in ca. 1848.

C. Settlement Pattern

Some development occurs in the Center, with the construction of the Second Orthodox Church (1835) and the conversion of the first church to an Academy/Town Hall. Extension of the linear Main Street residential corridor continues, primarily east to Turnpike Road. Elsewhere, abandonment of marginal, upland farms occurs.

D. Economic Base

E. Architecture

Residential: The predominant house type of the period is the Greek Revival, gable end form of both three and five bays. An equal distribution of one- and two-story, three-bay, side passage plans occurs, while most of the five-bay, center entry dwellings are one story in height. This gable end house is particularly noticeable in the Center. One rearwall chimney house was noted. Scattered examples of the center and double chimney house were also noted. South Village also contains these common Greek Revival house types.

Fewer examples of later period, Italianate or Second Empire houses occur. Of the later period survivals, the gable end house form is again the most common. One two-story, double chimney Second Empire house is known. In addition, two Gothic Revival detailed houses were observed, one being a single-story, three-bay, center chimney plan and the other a one-story, gable-end, center entry house combining Greek and Gothic Revival ornament.

Institutional: Second meetinghouse of the Orthodox society (1835) is a gable end structure with a three-bay facade and pointed-arched windows. The square tower also has pointed arches in the belfry. Repairs and improvements were made in 1853. A mid-century gable end engine house and a gable end post office building survive. Also in the Center is the one-story, three-bay, gable end District Schoolhouse.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes

The 19th century road network continues in use.

B. Population

During the first 25 years of this period the town's population dropped from 994 in 1870 to 804 in 1895; thereafter growing to 922 in 1915. Manufacturing remained a minor source of employment. The foreign-born within the population increased in proportion, expanding particularly after 1890 to 7.3% in 1895, and to 15% by 1915. These figures are still low for the county, and include immigrants from England, Sweden, French and English Canada, and

increasingly, Finland. The town formed a Farmers and Mechanics Club in 1880, and a Grange eight years later; a military band was formed in 1887. The town did not centralize its schools until very late in this period.

C. Settlement Pattern

Relatively little development occurs, the most notable changes being the addition of a library (1901) to the Center, and the construction of new sawmills at the South Ashby mill village.

D. Economic Base

E. Architecture

Residential: Very little residential development for the period. The gable end form remains the most common.

Institutional: The two-story brick, Colonial Revival Lyman Academy was built ca. 1910. The one-story Classical Revival brick and brownstone Library (1901) was designed by Fitchburg architect Henry M. Francis. The town hall is a 1902 two-story, frame Colonial Revival structure.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes

By the mid-1920s, the east/west corridor through Ashby Center to Rindge, N.H. is improved as Route 119 (Townsend Road-Main Street-Rindge State Road), with a 1931 bridge over Willard Brook. By ca. 1930, a north/south route from Fitchburg to New Hampshire through the east part of town is improved as Route 31 (State Road-Greenville Road).

B. Population

From a figure of 922 in 1915 the population of the town dropped to 834 in 1920; expansion returned at that point, so that the total exceeds 1,000 for the first time since 1865 with a figure of 1,026 in 1940. The proportion of foreign-born continued to grow, reaching 26% in 1940; 27.4% were classified as rural the same year.

C. Settlement Pattern

Little development occurs. Willard Brook State Forest established in the southeast.

D. Economic Base

E. Architecture

Residential: Building activity continued to be minimal. A Four Square plan house was noted and a 1920s style bungaloid dwelling.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

Inventory appears to be relatively good and fairly representative, if not comprehensive. Tends to concentrate on Ashby Center.

XII. SOURCES