

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

AYER

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.

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

DATE: April, 1980

COMMUNITY: Ayer

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Located on riverine lowlands and adjacent hilly uplands. Terrain shaped primarily by glacial outwash action. Generally a gravel soil. Most drainage west into Nashua River via Nonacoicus and Long Pond Brooks; eastern fringe drains NE into the Merrimack via Bennett's Brook.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Incorporated as Town of Ayer, 1871 from sections of Groton and Shirley.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Industrial and military community on western corridor through central uplands. Located along Nashua River with native sites suspected on Nonacoicus Brook and around Sandy Pond. Early axis of travel from Groton and Littleton, but frontier instability delayed settlement until mid-18th century. Mill sites along Nonacoicus Brook from Groton during Colonial period with some surviving 18th century houses along early highways. Continued use of water power sites for Groton town until mid-19th century when Fitchburg Railroad created regional junction point on western route. Subsequent growth of town center through late 19th century with array of modest Victorian residential architecture and brick business blocks. Nashua meadows chosen as Fort Devens army post during First World War and expanded substantially during Second World War with complex of original wooden barracks and Historical Revival brick officers' quarters, with base airport along river valley. Improvement of local highway system with original concrete bridges of mid-20th century design. Recent development has been dependent upon stability of army base with consequent stagnation of town center and limited suburban development.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Located along the edge of the Nashua River and the interior highlands of Middlesex County. The primary trail route follows east/west along the valley of Nonacoicus Brook around Sandy Pond conjectured as Willow-Sandy Ponds Roads to Main Street and over the Nashua meadows along a presumed trail to the documented ford across the River near Bishop Road (Fort Devens Reservation). Conjectured branches north to Groton follow Farmers Row and to Forge Pond as Westford Street.

B. Settlement Pattern:

While no sites reported, possible along Nashua River, Nonacoicus Brook as well as Sandy and Long Ponds.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Access to seasonal fish runs in Nashua and tributaries; fresh water fishing in ponds. Potential for agriculture as well as hunting/gathering.

D. Observations:

Location with access to river and ponds makes this a logical location for Nipmuck-related sites. Very little data is available on native sites for this whole subregion.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails continue as highways during the 17th century, with the Sandy Pond-Main Street route along Nonacoicus Brook.

B. Population:

Apparently no colonial inhabitants.

C. Settlement:

No colonial settlement.

D. Economic Base:

Part of Groton common lands.

E. Observations:

Apparently an unused portion of Groton plantation, too removed from town center. Site of period saw mill on Nonacoicus Brook is in Harvard.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Primary east/west highway along Nonacoicus Brook remains in place with the Nashua River crossing shifted north to Pages Bridge (1726) along the Fitchburg Road (Route 2A), and to the south along West Main Street. Connecting links to Groton from the Nonacoicus mill sites along Park, Washington and Snake Hill Roads, with secondary links south to Harvard.

B. Population:

A few people by late 17th century, but number remains small until after 1740. No specific figures available.

C. Settlement:

Hezekiah Usher's garrison house, about 1690 on Nonacoicus Brook. Additional scattered farms along brook during 18th century but without focus.

D. Economic Base:

Agriculture and grazing. Pierce's grist and saw mill on Nonacoicus Brook, from 1770. Also Pierce's Tavern, from 1773, location not specified.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Few houses existed in Ayer during this period; extremely few (perhaps less than half-dozen) remain. Apparent examples of the period include at least one central-chimney gambrel-roof cottage and several central-chimney two-story houses; it is unlikely that any high-style was built during this period; however, one brick house of uncertain date may have been built at the end of the period or during the early Federal Period (see Federal Period-Residential architecture).

F. Observations:

An outlying agricultural district of Groton with limited growth during mid-18th century.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Colonial highways remain in place with Nashua River bridge crossings. Primary east/west road continues as Main-Sandy Pond Road.

B. Population:

Population statistics for this period are included with Groton and are not available individually. A small increase in population may be inferred from the division of Groton School District #5 (which covered most of Ayer after 1793) into two school districts in 1805. No foreign-born population is known to have existed nor are any religious societies known to have existed within the present town boundaries.

C. Settlement Location:

A small cluster of houses may have been built in the vicinity of Washington and Park Streets and near the junction of Sandy Pond and Littleton Roads. Local histories note that until the opening of the railroad, Ayer contained only a dozen farms.

D. Economic Base:

By the end of the 18th century, despite the presence of several good water power privileges, the remoteness of the town from older settlements remained so great that manufacturing was virtually impossible. Virtually the only industry before the advent of the railroads were "about a dozen farms of doubtful prosperity," (Hurd, p. 657). Seven saw and/or grist mills were located on South, Pine Meadow, James, Sandy Pond and Nancoicus Brooks and the Nashua River.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Few buildings constructed. Apparent houses of the period include several 1-1/2 story central-chimney cottages, one of which contains a seemingly original chimney date stone inscribed "1821." Also present were several rear-wall chimney two-story houses and at least one end-wall chimney cottage. Little high-style was built with the probable exception of a two-story late-Georgian style brick and stone house (Park and Washington Streets) which has a tradition of having been built in 1791, although stylistically it could easily pre-date the Federal period. Tradition also associates this house with a family of Scottish stone and brick masons, one of whom, James Park, had reputedly worked as a surveyor/architect for the Duke of Argyle in Scotland prior to emigrating to New England in the mid-18th century.

Institutional:

One-story brick school house built c. 1792; wood-frame school house built c. 1810 but replaced in 1820 with a one-story brick building. No other institutional buildings known.

Commercial:

No known development with the possible exception of one or two taverns/inns.

Industrial:

No known development except for small scale grist/saw mills.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Nonacoicus Brook becomes corridor of east/west railroads from Boston, initially as Fitchburg (1845) around Long Hill through Ayer Center to Shepleys Hill, then Stony Brook (1848) from Westford, the Worcester and Nashua (1848) along James Brook to Groton and the Peterborough and Shirley (1848) across the Nashua all forming an important regional railroad junction at Ayer center by 1850.

B. Population:

Population statistics for this period are included with Groton and are not available individually. Growth is likely to have begun after the opening of the Fitchburg Railroad (1844) and the Worcester and Nashua Railroad (1846-48); population probably increased rapidly between c. 1848 and c. 1860 and after 1865. Foreign-born population present after c. 1845; Irish immigrants were by far the largest individual group. Religious societies included a Baptist Society (1851), a Unitarian Society (c. 1853-55), a Catholic Mission (1855), an Orthodox Congregational Society (1861), and a Methodist Society (1869).

C. Settlement Location:

Nearly all new settlement occurred along Main and Park Streets and along sidestreets running from these two streets; house lot subdivisions were opened as early as 1848-1850 and by 1856 the present town center was known by the name of Groton Junction.

D. Economic Base:

Paper mill established 1837 at Nashua River. Little development in Ayer center until 1840s with arrival of four railroads. Thereafter, in relatively rapid succession followed a plow shop (1850) later operated by the Ames Plow Company), the first large manufacturing establishment in Ayer; a substantial tannery on Tannery Street (1854), (which would remain Ayer's chief non-rail-road industry until it burned in 1961); and, near the Tannery, an iron foundry begun by a Lowell firm but whose success was intermittent.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Modest side-hall plan cottages (a few Greek Revival style, most Italianate style) and modest side-hall plan houses (mostly Italianate style) were by far the most widespread house-type. Several slightly more ambitious Italianate style houses were built along East Main Street; however, no high-style seems to have been built. Workers' housing of the period seems to have been rare, consisting of several double houses (Greek Revival style--West Main Street). Secondary sources note that most workers in the village owned their own houses, suggesting that company-owned housing was never an important part of the village's development.

Institutional:

Churches built during the period were: Baptist (1856--style unknown), Unitarian Chapel (1853-1855--style unknown), Orthodox Congregational (1867--style unknown), Catholic (1855-chapel; 1869-70 church--Victorian Gothic style), Methodist (1869--style unknown). New school houses of the period included a one-story wood-frame building (1852) which was raised to two-stories (1865) and partially converted to a fire house, two brick school houses (1859, Washington Street and 1867, Main Street). Camp Stevens, a Civil War training camp (1863) was established in Groton and may have included land now in Ayer, although secondary sources do not describe its exact location; buildings were constructed for the camp; however, all were either destroyed or moved after the Civil War.

Commercial:

First store in village was reportedly built in 1851 (Main Street). Wood-frame blocks, one and two-story, were built during the 1850s and 1860s, included in this development were Italianate style blocks, such as Harmony Hall (1858); burned) which contained store fronts at the first story and a public hall above. Much of the commercial development of this period was destroyed by fire (1872). Union Railroad station built 1848 (appearance unknown).

Industrial:

First major industrial complex built 1850; most industrial development consisted of small scale factories of varying sizes, plans, and materials.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transporation Routes:

Railroad shops expanded at Ayer Center with regional freight yards at Plow Shop Pond. Electric trolleys connecting with Fitchburg and Shirley built along W. Main Street to Ayer center and extended east to Forge Village and Lowell along East Main Street-Sandy Pond-Westford Roads by early 1900s.

B. Population:

Overall increase of approximate 50% during period; however, increases occurred erratically between 1880-1885, 1895-1900 and 1905-1910. Foreign-born population increased to approximately 20% of total population by 1915; the largest foreign-born group throughout the period was formed by Irish immigrants. Episcopalian Parish formed c. 1895; no other new religious societies recorded for period.

C. Settlement Location:

Same trends as in preceding period.

D. Economic Base:

Shoddy mill established at paper mill site on Nashua River by William Mitchell (this, Mitchellville); two furniture factories in Ayer center. Move of the Ames Plow Company to Worcester in 1875 proved substantial economic loss and extensive plant remained idle for ten years, finally burning in 1886. Tannery (employing 100 in 1900) and railroads remained principal employers. The railroad facilities were said to provide the largest classification yard in New England.

E. Architecture

Residential:

As in preceding period, little or no high-style was built. The majority of houses continued to be of the side-hall plan type, although relatively more were of two-full stories than in the preceding period. Examples of this type of housing were built in both Victorian Gothic and Queen Anne styles, few examples were built in the Second Empire style.

Institutional:

Unitarian Church built 1875 (Victorian Gothic style?); Baptist Church enlarged, 1878; Catholic Church built 1880 (Victorian Gothic style); Methodist Church built 1887 (Queen Anne/Victorian Gothic style); Episcopal Church built c. 1895 (late Gothic Revival style). Three school houses in use throughout most of period, consisted of graded schools in the village. Victorian Gothic style town hall built 1875-1876; firehouse built 1870; Renaissance Revival style public library built c. 1900.

Commercial:

Existing commercial district destroyed by fire, 1872; rebuilding consisted of a mixture of two and three-story brick blocks (Second Empire and late Italianate styles) and some one- and two-story wood-frame buildings (also Second Empire and Italianate styles). Although row construction became dominant in the town's commercial district, construction materials remained mixed between wood and brick.

Industrial:

Varied manufacturers--four major complexes; most industrial buildings were of utilitarian design, two-stories high, built either of wood or brick; new industrial buildings were located near railroad beds.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Street railways abandoned by 1920s with improvement of autohighways along east/west corridor as Route 2 (now 2A) as Fitchburg Road-Park-Main Streets through Ayer center with extension as Littleton Road in 1930s. North/south connecting links as Route 111 to Groton and 110 to Harvard. Fort Devens Airport (1941) constructed on Nashua River meadows between Bishop and Fitchburg Roads.

B. Population:

Increase between 1915 and 1920 followed by stable population until increase after 1930. New religious societies and foreign-born population not recorded in secondary sources.

C. Settlement Location:

Minor increases at town center and along Central Avenue; possible military housing at Devencrest c. 1940-50. "Camp" Devens established 1917 as a military training center with 600 wood-frame buildings on 1000 acres. Renamed Fort Devens, 1931; permanent brick buildings constructed beginning 1939; acreage increased to 10,000, 1940. Largest military installation in New England.

D. Economic Base:

Railroads and Tannery remained largest employers. No major new industries. Two cold storage facilities for apples, cutlery shop and builder of industrial sewing machines.

E. Architecture

Residential:

New construction made up mostly of modest bungalows with the possible exception of Devencrest where multiple-family may have been built for military personnel prior to or during World War II.

Institutional:

New school construction likely but unrecorded.

Commercial:

Some one-story store fronts and gas stations at village center, otherwise little new development.

Industrial:

Little new development.

XI. SOURCES

Turner, Ian Donald. "The Economic Impact of a Military Installation on the Surrounding Area: A Case Study of Fort Devens and Ayer, Massachusetts" (1965)