

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

BILLERICA

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.



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MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

DATE: March, 1980

COMMUNITY: Billerica

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Located on complex rolling terrain. Basic N/S grain of landscape is reflected in both highlands and waterways. Gradual uplands of reshaped bedrock and glacial outwash features extend away from Concord River and become rugged inland. A sandy to gravelly soil. Some upland ponds as well as areas of bog and swamp. Drainage north via Concord River for western half of town. Most of eastern half flows NE via Shawsheen. Extreme eastern part serves as headwaters for Ipswich River.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Lands granted to Thomas Dudley, John Winthrop and others between Concord and Shawsheen Rivers after 1637. Lands around 'Shawsheen' granted to Cambridge, 1641. Established as plantation of 'Billirikeyca' in 1655. Additional grants 1656, 1661. During 18th century, town size decreased by half with creation of new towns: Bedford (1729), Wilmington (1733), Tewksbury (1734) and Carlisle (1780).

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW:

Suburban industrial town on north/west corridor between Boston and Lowell. Located along Concord River with interior valley of Shawsheen. Native sites reported around Nutting Lake, and Concord River fordway at North Billerica, with suspected village site on Shawsheen at Pinehurst. Early axis of English settlement along Concord with town center by mid-17th century, including surviving long lot street pattern and some First Period houses on outlying roads near Mill Brook. Colonial agricultural economy with local mill sites on tributary streams. Several 18th century lean-to houses in rural settings and high style examples in town center. By early 19th century located on Boston/New Hampshire axis with primary turnpike to Merrimack valley and historic Middlesex Canal, which retains stonework at river crossings and portions of canal bed. Formation of mill village at North Billerica during mid-19th century with access to canal and early Boston railroad including well preserved mills and housing along Concord River. Secondary center at East Billerica as canal and railroad village. Town center contains range of period civic buildings around original common, including small Victorian residential district along main street. Expansion of Lowell and suburban Boston by early 20th century along local trolley routes with highway development between town center and North Billerica by mid-20th century including early concrete bridges over Concord. Suburban pressure has continued along Route 3 corridor with recent large scale tract development and commercial incursions within town center; at the same time North Billerica and the Mill Brook area retain authentic early industrial period landscapes.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Located along valleys of Concord and Shawsheen Rivers with important

junction of trails north to Merrimack River. Conjectured routes follow along Concord valley to documented ford at North Billerica (apparently intact site) as Concord-Boston Roads through town center on east side and Treble Cove and Chelmsford Roads on west side. Other trails circuit around Shawsheen River from east (Burlington) likely as Boston-Allen Roads looping to Andover-Salem Roads in East Billerica. Secondary trails appear to follow Cook Street near Pinehurst and possible Lexington Road to Nuttings Pond (native site). Junction of trails at present town center open to conjecture as Boston and Andover Roads.

B. Settlement:

A few period sites reported along Concord River (North Billerica) and northside of Nuttings Lake. Numerous other unspecified sites along Concord, also on Content Brook. Graves and a "wigwam site" north of Jacquit Brook (ex-Winning Pond). Additional sites probable along Shawsheen as well as Concord especially on south-facing, well drained terraces and knolls and at confluence points and rifts (fords). Sites also probable around ponds.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Access to major anadromous fish runs in Concord and possibly Shawsheen. Freshwater fishing (ice fishing) in Nutting Lake and ponds. Good agricultural land. Potential for both upland and lowland hunting/gathering.

D. Observations:

An area with environmental diversity to support a sizable native population. In addition, seasonal fish runs in Concord probably attracted large seasonal native population. Sites are likely to be related to coastal Pawtucket group but some Nipmuck influence possible as well. Tribal affiliations and boundaries are not well understood. No European contact material reported to date though presence is likely.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails used as highways in mid-17th century with location of Billerica town site (1660) at Boston, Andover and Concord Roads. North Billerica ford over Concord River replaced by bridge in 1650s.

B. Population:

Some native inhabitants remained; difficult to estimate number. About 9 colonial families in 1654. By end of period about 50 families, primarily from Cambridge, Woburn and Braintree.

C. Settlement:

Native settlement and planting fields mentioned north of Nutting Lake, 1665. Undated (1660s) map shows circular (palisaded?) "Indian Towne" east of Shawsheen River (Pinehurst). After 1654 colonial settlement in two areas: the town grant (Billerica Center) primarily Cambridge people -- meetinghouse built 1659 on southside of common; and the Dudley Farm (section along Concord River and Concord Road south of town grant) primarily Woburn people -- south cemetery, 1663. Third focus after 1660, Braintree group on "Loes Plain" (south-east of Fox Hill around Webb Brook and Allen Road). Also scattered farms in North Billerica area and along Boston/Allen Roads at Shawsheen crossing. Considerable competition for control of common lands.

D. Economic Base:

Agriculture and grazing - meadow along Concord, Shawsheen and Webb Brook of prime importance. Seasonal lumbering. Fishing and some fur trading probable. Some milling: John Parker's mill, about 1660, possibly on Content Brook; bog iron mentioned in Shawsheen valley. Simon Crosbee's Tavern, 1672 (no location).

E. Observations:

An important resource area; target for colonial expansion from late 1630s. Diverse and scattered settlement after 1650 with only minimal consolidation as a community.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1676-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Regional highways remain from 17th century with focus of roads at town center. Secondary highways established by early 18th century include Range-way Road (1708) to Carlisle, and High and Pond Streets to Tewksbury and Salem and Lexington Roads. Bridges established across Concord River in 1730s at River and Bridge Streets.

B. Population:

Estimated at 401 people in 1688. 769 in 1707. Slow growth due to on-going frontier warfare. Rapid development after division of remaining common lands (1708) and end of Queen Anne's War (1714). In 1733, 1252 inhabitants; 1132 in 1755 (drop due to formation of new towns). Census of 1765 listed 1334 people in 223 families and 189 houses.

C. Settlement:

Though escaped damage during King Philip's War, town raided in 1692 and 1695. Gradual consolidation of village center during late 17th century. Meetinghouse expanded 1680, new meetinghouse built 1694 but did not become a major population center. Settlement remained dispersed throughout town with scattered farms (many along Concord and Boston Roads) and several small focal points, often around mills: Osgood's mills, after 1707 (Wilson Street area); French's mill, after 1764 (East Billerica).

D. Economic Base:

Agriculture and grazing, dairy and some apple orchards. Considerable lumbering. Several mills: Hill's, about 1680 on Content Brook (?); Osgood's grist/saw mill 1708 on Concord, falling mill added 1747 (North Billerica); William French's sawmill, 1764 on Content Brook (East Billerica). John Bacon's tavern, after 1699 (no location); other taverns probable.

E. Architecture Residential: Nearly all houses recorded for this period are of the central-chimney, two-story type; a small number possess late Georgian style entries; the only other recorded house types include one central-chimney cottage and one central-chimney two-story house with a gambrel roof; some twin-chimney houses exist, although most seem to post-date 1775.

F. Observations:

Town did not really coalesce during period--too big, too diverse--centrifugal forces rather than centralizing forces dominated. Result was formation of several new towns rather than a single strong one. Histories are rather weak, especially for 18th century.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highways remain from 18th century. Improvements of regional routes between New Hampshire and Boston around periphery of town, originally as Nashua Road (Route 4) in late 18th century. Middlesex Turnpike (1806) now abandoned in large part with original roadbed intact near Concord River, and Middlesex Canal (1795-1801) through East and North Billerica with surviving stone abutments over Shawsheen and Concord Rivers (marked sites); and canal bed largely abandoned right of way except in small portions.

B. Population:

Population drop off after 1776 due to separation of parts of Billerica to be incorporated with Carlisle; population increased between 1790 and 1800; thereafter it fluctuated in 1289-1383 range; no known foreign-born population. Baptists present during late 18th century. Baptist Society formed 1828; Congregational Society formed 1829; First Parish became Unitarian, 1829.

C. Settlement Location: Village formed at town center; small clusters of houses built at Pollard Street and Salem Road, and at North Billerica; scattered new building along major roads.

D. Economic Base: Despite success of Middlesex Canal, only manufacturing industry to be established was the North Billerica woolen mill of Francis Faulkner, who came from South Acton in 1811.

E. Architecture Residential: Full range present from vernacular to high style. Late Georgian vernacular house types continued to be built until ca. 1800; transitional Georgian/Federal high-style present during mid-1790s, several examples of which may have been designed by Reuben Duren (a local architect); fully developed Federalist high-style present after ca. 1805-1810. Vernacular houses of the period were mostly of the rear-wall chimney plan, two-stories high, followed by a smaller number of twin-chimney houses and rear-wall chimney cottages. High-style houses were mostly of the end-wall chimney type with square floor plans, hip roofs and partial brick construction. While most major examples were located at North Billerica and Billerica center, some high-style houses exist in country locations.

Institutional: Federalist style meetinghouse built 1797;² simple late Federalist style meetinghouses built at Center in 1830, one for the First Baptist Society, the other for the Congregational Society. 8 school districts established 1791-1793, school houses built soon after. Private academies established at Center in 1794 (Pemberton Academy, closed ca. 1808) 1820 (Billerica Academy-closed 1836).

Commercial: Two or three taverns present in Center after opening of through stage line, ca. 1795; no stores recorded in secondary sources.

Industrial: Grist mills, woolen mills (wood-frame?) established at North Billerica, 1811.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Turnpikes and canal remain from early 19th century. Early railroad link between Boston and Lowell (1835) parallels Middlesex Canal through East and North Billerica, forcing closure of water route by mid-19th century.

B. Population:

Especially rapid growth of population between 1830 and 1840, thereafter steady growth throughout period. Foreign-born population made up primarily of Irish immigrants after ca. 1835-40. Universalist Society founded 1842, probably disbanded by 1868; Roman Catholic Parish established at North Billerica, 1868; Baptist Society established at North Billerica, 1869.

C. Settlement Location:

Center expanded southward and eastward along major roads; village formed at North Billerica; extremely small cluster of houses built at East Billerica (Pattenville).

D. Economic Base:

Proximity to the Lowell textile concerns probably led to the establishment of the Talbot dyewood mill in 1839 in North Billerica, followed ten years later by a chemical plant. Not until 1857 was the Talbot Woolen Mill built, opposite Faulkner's mill. Elsewhere in the town a thriving glue factory developed (Jaquith Bros., 1867) and the Hill Machine Shop produced the internationally known patented machine for splitting leather.

E. Architecture Residential: Federalist style remained in use until ca. 1840; extremely few (if any) high-style examples of subsequent styles, i.e., Greek Revival and Italianate. By far, the largest number of houses built were of the side hall plan, two-stories high, followed by a small number of cottages. Workers' housing was built throughout the period at North Billerica, including wood-frame two-story row houses (late Federal-c. 1835-45), double cottages (Greek Revival-c. 1845-60) and astylistic mid-Victorian double houses and cottages (1860s). Second Empire style houses are rare, several high-style examples were built in the town's two major villages, c. 1865-75. Institutional: Universalist meetinghouse built 1842 (appearance unrecorded), moved and converted to Roman Catholic Church, 1868; Victorian Gothic style Baptist Church built at North Billerica, 1869-70; First Parish meetinghouse remodelled in Greek Revival style, 1844. Ten school districts in operation by 1844, no apparent centralization or grading of schools prior to 1870. Private academy established by donation, 1852 (Howe Academy), built two-story late Greek Revival/Italianate style school house, brick construction. Temple-front, Greek Revival style town hall built by 1844; two firehouses built prior to 1870, one at Center (?), one at North Billerica. Commercial: Small number of wood-frame blocks probably built in villages, although none have been recorded in secondary sources. Industrial: Brick textile mills, 2 to 5 stories high, originally with pitched roofs, built on water privileges at North Billerica, c. 1835-60, design of mills related to Lowell textile mills and may even have had same direct involvement by the Proprietors of Locks and Canals at Lowell. Other small-scale manufacturer (chemicals, glue, etc.) established during period, but did not result in the construction of mill complexes or distinctive architectural type.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Extension of secondary branch railroad from North Billerica to Bedford (1877), now abandoned in part. Street railway routes through Bedford center from suburban Boston to Lowell along Concord and Boston Roads to North Billerica as Pollard Street in early 1900s.

B. Population:

Steady, moderate growth throughout period except for small decline between 1905 and 1910. Foreign-born residents constituted approximately 1/4 of the population throughout the period; the largest immigrant groups were Irish and English. No new religious congregations mentioned in secondary sources.

C. Settlement Location:

Major focus of settlement was at North Billerica; scattered new construction occurred along Pollard Street and Boston Road between North Billerica and Billerica Center. A small amount of new construction also occurred at the periphery of Billerica Center.

D. Economic Base:

Some limited expansion of existing mills. No new industries developed. Market garden products shipped extensively to Lowell and Boston.

E. Architecture Residential: Very little high-style present with minor exception of several ambitious Second Empire, Italianate and Queen Anne style houses located near the town's two villages. Much of the new construction at North Billerica consisted of double houses and cottages (Victorian Gothic and Queen Anne styles) built for workers. New construction at Billerica Center tended more toward side-hall plan and modest single family examples of late Italianate, Queen Anne and Colonial Revival styles. Some bungalows may have been built in scattered locations during this period; however, most probably post-date 1915-20.

Institutional: Chapel added to First Baptist Church, 1877. Congregational Church altered 1885; wood-frame late Gothic style church built at North Billerica, c. 1900; Mission Style Church (Roman Catholic?) built at North Billerica c. 1910-25 (?). High Victorian Gothic style library built at Center (1880); branch library in brick block at North Billerica (c. 1880); Colonial Revival style town hall built at Center (1895). Gradual consolidation and grading of schools occurred after c. 1892-92, although multiple-room school houses seem to have been built at North Billerica and Billerica Center in the early 1870s (appearance unknown); wood-frame Colonial Revival style schoolhouse built at Center (ca. 1900), brick Colonial Revival style schoolhouse built at North Billerica (c. 1905) and high school at Center (1914-16), only four schoolhouses in use by 1915, including Howe School of 1852.

Wood-frame, Italianate style I.O.O.F. Hall built 1870s. Private Boys' School established in Second Empire style building, 1879 (adapted house?), burned in 1888 and was replaced by a stone building on "the Bedford Road."

Commercial: Small number of two-story, wood-frame, late Italianate style commercial blocks (c. 1870-1880) at Center; one-story, wood-frame Colonial Revival style storefronts at Center (c. 1910-20); little commercial development apparent at North Billerica. Two railroad depots present during period.

Industrial: Expansion of brick mills at North Billerica by addition of brick wings and additional upper stories, styles vary from Italianate (c. 1860-75) to decorative elements of Queen Anne (c. 1885-90) and utilitarian design (after c. 1905).

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Abandonment of street railway routes in 1920s with rebuilding of highways as autoroutes including N/S former Route 3 (3A) Boston Road with original concrete bridge over Concord River (c. 1925) and E/W Route 129 as

Salem-Chelmsford Roads through North Billerica with original concrete bridge over Concord (1930). Post-war superhighway Route 3 (1953) parallels original route of Middlesex turnpike.

B. Population:

Extremely rapid growth throughout period (part of growth may reflect opening of County House of Correction). No information available regarding foreign-born population; no new religious societies recorded in secondary sources, St. Mary's Roman Catholic Parish formed c. 1910-20 (?).

C. Settlement Location:

Small expansion of existing centers; subdivisions opened at Pinehurst (c. 1910-20) and probably at Nutting Lake (c. 1910-20).

D. Economic Base:

Construction of the Boston & Maine North Billerica car shops (including the warehouse and handling facilities of John's Manville) increased employment opportunities of North Billerica. Talbot and Faulkner woolen mills reached their peak production in 1920s. Other areas of town remained agricultural, producing especially apples, cherries and strawberries.

E. Architecture Residential: No high-style apparent; largest amount of new construction included modest bungalows, small-scale Colonial Revival style cottages and astylistic cottages, particularly in subdivisions. Little or no new workers' housing seems to have been built.

Institutional: Two new schools constructed by 1940 (probably Colonial Revival Style) - total of six schools in operation, 1940. New-medieval style prison (County House of Correction) built, c. 1925-35 (Treble Cove Road). Late Gothic style church (St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church) built c. 1910-20 at Pinehurst.

Commercial: Strip development along Route 3A (?).

Industrial: Brick car shops and warehouse for Boston & Maine Railroad and John's Manville.

XI. SOURCES

Hazen, Henry. History of Billerica (1883)

Mills, Christopher. History of a Neighborhood in East Billerica (1975)