

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

BOYLSTON

Report Date: 1983

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.



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MHC TOWN RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

DATE: 1983

COMMUNITY: BOYLSTON

I. TOPOGRAPHY

The hilly, rough, uneven surface of Boylston descends to the north and northwest from a height of over 700 feet above sea level near the Shrewsbury border to just under 400 feet at the shores of Wachusett Reservoir in the northwest portion of town. Once the fertile valley of the South Branch of the Nashua River, containing some of the most agriculturally productive land in the town as well as the major industrial sites, it was flooded in 1905 to provide a source of drinking water for metropolitan Boston. The area covered by the Reservoir, measuring 2761 acres in Boylston, closely parallels the form of glacial Lake Nashua, a large lake formed at the base of the last retreating ice sheet. Outwash from this lake accounts for the belt of sandy loam and gravel soils along the Muddy Brook valley and south towards Lake Quinsigamond. Scattered beds of clay are found in this outwash plain, one of which was set aside by the early proprietors in 1728 for use in the manufacture of bricks and pottery. Three of the town's four natural ponds are located in this plain, probably the result of isolated ice blocks left behind by the retreating ice sheet.

Most of the remaining land in Boylston consists of hills and valleys ranging from extremely stony and unculturable to moderately stony and well suited to dairying, pasturage, and orchards.

The several streams of Boylston, which provided few water power sites, flow into three different drainage basins whose points of divergence are in the southern highlands of Boylston: the Nashua River basin to the north, the Assabet River basin to the east, and the Blackstone River Basin to the southwest.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Second precinct of Shrewsbury from 1742. Incorporated as a town, from part of Shrewsbury 1786. Part included in the new town of West Boylston, 1808. Parts annexed to West Boylston 1820.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

A suburban, central upland community, on the Nashua River Corridor with native sites at Rocky Pond, and possibly at Spruce, Pout and Sewall Ponds. Early 18th century settlement (1705) near Sawyer's Mills on the Nashua River interval, with permanent occupation after 1718 Meetinghouse site (Second Parish, Shrewsbury) established 1742. Agricultural expansion restricted by extremely rocky uplands in eastern half of town. Late 19th century agriculture dominated by dairying and orcharding. Manufacturing at Sawyer's Mills attracts some foreign population. Railroad connection through Nashua Valley comes very late (1890s). Major socio-economic impact and landscape alteration by construction of

Wachusett Reservoir (1905) Best agricultural lands flooded or converted to watershed reservation, and industrial capacity destroyed. Early 20th century suburban development from Worcester in southwest (Morningdale). Area at periphery of current regional industrial development core, but good I-290 connection is stimulating further suburban development, threatening remaining upland agricultural landscapes. Further industrial development will probably concentrate along Route 140 corridor.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Primarily east-west paths: Linden and Stiles, north and south alternatives joining as Central-Sear Hill, which fords former Nashua, now flooded by Wachusett Reservoir. Green Street, here and in Northborough to the east, probably path to Rocky Pond camps.

B. Settlement Pattern:

One probable agricultural site north of Rocky Pond, based on frequent early references to Indian cornfield. Others probably located along Nashua River, currently flooded, terraces, and Diamond Hill, in particular, where finds have been made.

C. Economic Base:

Seasonal fishing, gathering and hunting, as well as agriculture.

D. Observations:

Little information available on Nip-Muck but regional patterns suggest low density, seasonal exploitation, with more permanent settlements located to the east and west.

V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Same as during Contact period.

B. Population:

Native population diminished with formation of praying towns. Persistent raids on nearby Lancaster curtailed colonial settlement to the south and west. Grants to individuals from the General Court to land in this vicinity: Davenport (1655), Rocky Pond (1684), Malden (1662). Rawson (1686), and Sewall (). No settlement on them during this period.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Continued seasonal use by native population, but no evidence of colonial occupation.

D. Economic Base:

Same as during Contact Period.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Location of period structures and first division lots indicates continued use of native paths, elaborated to reach dispersed farms. North-south routes include Main Street, School Street, Sewall Street, and Cross Street. East-west include minor roads: Temple between School and Cross, Rocky Pond-Warren Streets to Stiles Road.

B. Population:

Few figures available prior to incorporation (1786); (at church gathering (1743) 19 males, 16 females) but 1780 figures indicate probable 50% of Shrewsbury population there by 3rd quarter of 18th century, about 700 in 1765 (including much of West Boylston). Parent town was Shrewsbury, migrants from Sudbury and Marlborough.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Individual grants included in formation of Shrewsbury township. with dispersed 50-70 acre houselots of that town's initial division (1717); sufficient settlers (1743) for formation as a distinct precinct. Location of meeting house at geographic center of precinct (1744), as well as all other municipal structures including burying ground (1743), noon house, pound, parsonage, as well as a tavern (). School probably already located nearby and may have influenced the choice. Two garrison houses on Linden Central Streets.

D. Economic Base:

Primarily agricultural with particular strength in cattle and grains; orchard products trade out to town, including hickory, apple and stone fruit. Clay resources. Mills located on French and Sewall Brooks by mid-century; first on Nashua River (1720) at Sawyer's Mills, now flooded.

E. Architecture:

Residential: First settlement in the area of Sawyer's Mills (north-west section of town (1705/06). Earliest recorded house dated 1729. Generally, houses of the period seem to have been equally divided between two-story center chimney and two-story double chimney plans, both being predominantly five bays wide. Of note is a two-story five-bay hip or hip double chimney house recorded as 1757.

Institutional: Three garrison houses recorded ca. 1720. Three school squadrons formed in 1733; center schoolhouse by 1742. First meeting house (1743) with noonhouse of approximately same date. Hearse house erected during third quarter of century. Powder house on common, 1772.

Commercial: Four taverns in operation during period: Bush Tavern (1734) in center; Jonathan Keyes Tavern 1733/34, burned (?1777; Ezra Beaman Tavern (part of West Boylston after 1808), opened 1746, a two-story, three-bay double chimney hip on hip which may have survived well into 19th century.

Industrial: Town's industry located at Sawyer's Mill in northwest section from mid 18th century until Nashua River dammed for Wachusett Reservoir in 1899-1900. By 1700, saw/grist mill, clothiers' mill, fulling mill and neats-foot oil mill in operation at Sawyer's Mills. Otherwise, town primarily agricultural (fruit trees: apples) with scattered mills.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Colonial period roads continue in use, and a set of main highways radiate from the center, with connections to Worcester (Main Street), Providence (School Street and Cross Street) and Boston (Stiles Road), as well as West Boylston (Scar Hill Road), Lancaster (Main Street), and Berlin (Linden Street).

B. Population:

Population rises from 1790 (839) to 1800 (1058), then drops with the separation of West Boylston in 1808. It then rises from 1810 (800) to 1820 (902), but then drops again by 1830 (820). Tory minister dismissed in 1775 for royalist political sympathies. Apparently some local support for Shay's Rebellion. Major controversy over meeting house location from 1791 splits congregation. Second meeting house built and second parish formed 1796. Typhus epidemic causes 12-20 deaths, 1813. Baptist church built 1815 in southeast corner of town. Unitarian Society formed in 1827. Universalist Society formed 1828, soon merges with Unitarians. Social library established 1792.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Some concentration of activities at the meeting house center. Second meeting house constructed, north of first house 1796. Brick public house constructed in 1818, and small cluster of dwellings develops around crossroads area, but by 1825 there is a sufficiently large nucleation at Sawyer's Mills for the town's first post office to be located there. Baptist Church locates in Straw Hollow (Reservoir and Stiles Streets) in southeast.

Some dispersion of settlement into uplands in eastern part of town, but agricultural settlement continues to concentrate along Nashua River Valley, southwest plain, and northwest hills, and Muddy Brook meadows.

D. Economic Base:

Like many of its neighboring towns, Boylston's primary and economic activity during the late 18th century and early 19th century was agriculture, beef, pork, butter, cheese, fruit, and grain the leading products sold. Orchard growing, well suited to the hills of Boylston, experienced a revitalization and spurt in development, so that by 1806 there were 30 cider mills in town.

In 1794 Boylston contained four saw mills, two corn mills, a fulling mill, and an oil mill. With the separation of West Boylston from Boylston in 1808, Boylston lost its best water power sites and two saw mills, a grist mill and a fulling mill. Remaining water powered industry was located at Sawyer's Mills on the Nashua River in the northern part of town, where an oil mill, saw and grist mill, clothiers mill, fulling mill, carding machine, wire mill, triphammer, and blacksmith shop were located by 1817.

Tax lists of the early 19th century list one or two of the following craftsmen: housewright, tanner, clothier, blacksmith, as well as over 100 farmers. An industry dating from the mid 18th century was brickmaking, enlarged in scope in 1807 when a brickyard was established north of Green Hill.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Two-story, five-bay center chimney plans remain prevalent during the period but are matched by the total number of double chimney, end chimney, and rear wall chimney plans. One double chimney brick house and one end chimney with brick end walls are recorded. Town experienced drop in Population when West Boylston separated in 1808.

Institutional: Seven school districts created with \$300 allocated for construction of schoolhouse (1790). Second meeting house erected in 1792 (65' x 53') followed shortly by construction of second noonhouse (1799). Post office at Sawyer's Mills (1804). School districts realigned following withdrawal of West Boylston in 1808; five districts established and remained virtually unchanged until consolidation in early 20th century. Unitarian Society formed in 1827 followed by Universalist Society in 1828; the two merge ca. 1830. Impressive two-story gable end stone town hall erected north of common in 1830 with funds from a bequest.

Commercial: Several taverns in operation during the period: Abbott's Tavern in the center (1806-09), Taylor Tavern closes in 1810; Keyes Tavern apparently rebuilt ca. 1781 following fire of 1777; Bush's Tavern closes (1795); Hasting's Tavern built in 1818 in center, a two-story, five-bay, brick double-pile, center-passage plan, said to be made with bricks fired at Howe's brickyard (1807). Corner store erected 1811 which operated throughout 19th century. Industrial: All major industry for this and subsequent periods concentrated at Sawyer's Mills; other scattered mills including 30 cider mills by 1830. Howe's brickyard opens (1807) at Route 70 and Cross Street.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

The early 19th century road network remains in use,. In 1830, Central Street replaces Stiles Road as the main route to Northborough. Short spurline of Agricultural Railroad connects northern corner of town to Clinton railroad junction, 1856.

B. Population:

Population fluctuates irregularly with a slight loss (-20) over the period. Peak in 1860 (929). 1870 population 800. Foreign-born population 10% in 1865. Baptist church (1837), Unitarian Society (1840s) disbanded. Methodist services held 1845-50. Second meeting house demolished (perceived as too large), and third meeting house built 1835. Town hall (stone) built 1830. Local temperance movement 1853. Boylston Lyceum and three debating societies formed in 1850s.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Continuance of center as institutional focus with construction of stone town hall (1830), third meeting house (1835). Second burial ground (later Pine Grove Cemetery) located northwest of center of Scar Hill Road (1837).

Sawyer's Mills continues as industrial center. Straw Hollow developed as major commercial dairy/orchard complex.

D. Economic Base:

Agriculture continued to dominate Boylston's economy, employing the largest number of persons throughout the period. Several small manufacturing establishments, an increase in home industry, and one textile mill made their appearance. Boot and shoe making, a cottage industry since the late 18th century, continued as such until mid century, with as many as 40 people so employed during the 1830s and 1840s. Palm leaf hat and straw braid production was centered in the village of Straw Hollow in the southern end of town during the first half of this period but was never an extensively practiced occupation. A high of 3000 hats were made in 1832, declining to none by mid century.

Combmaking experienced a similar trend; in 1832 eight men were involved in the trade, but by 1845 this craft had also disappeared. The Howe brickyard continued to 1847 before closing; it would not open again until 1885.

Wood and wood products from Boylston's rich and varied forests became an important resource. Between 1845 and 1865 four to six hundred thousand board feet of lumber were cut annually by three sawmills, as well as nearly 4000 cords of firewood per year. Also active were a charcoal maker, several coopers, cabinetmakers, and wheelwrights. By 1860 a shoe box factory was erected, employing five men and producing \$15,00 worth of boxes and lumber in 1875.

The largest manufacturing enterprise began during this period was the erection of a cotton mill at Sawyer's Mills prior to 1855. That year 50 people were employed in the production of cotton yarn and gingham cloth worth \$70,000. By 1865 the value of goods produced more than doubled while the size of the workforce, now employed in a new brick mill (built 1862), did not change.

Butter and cheese, which dominated dairy production in the early years, declined as milk increased in importance as a market crop. In 1865 over 32,000 gallons of milk were sold, equalling the value of butter and cheese combined that year. By 1875 the amount of milk sold increased by a factor of almost five, while butter and cheese continued to decline. Beef, pork, and veal were also important market commodities, totaling over 100,000 lbs. in 1875. Apple orchards continued to grow, with several large manufacturers and dealers in refined cider and vinegar appearing by 1870. The importance of farming during this period is illustrated by the large majority of advertisers in the 1870 Beers Atlas who were farmers.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Greatest development appears to have occurred during the early portion of the period, specifically in double chimney and sidehall plan Greek Revival two-story dwellings and a few one-story dwellings. Little activity in the latter portion of the period.

Institutional: Third meeting house erected (1835) because second (1792) deemed too large and "cheerless" (Dupuis, 1978). Post office opens at town center (1845). Brickyard at Route 70 and Cross Street closed (1845). In 1850-57 new schoolhouses erected in most districts; first high school classes are held in 1852. Spur line of the Agricultural Railway (Boston, Clinton, Fitchburg) extended into Boylston from Clinton in 1856 (discontinued by 1886).

Commercial: Hasting's Tavern in town center closes during 1840s; no tavern in town as result of temperance lectures of John B. Gough. In 1850, Thomas Cunningham builds a dance pavillion and picnic resort on Nashua River above Sawyer's Mills.

Industrial: Sawyer's Mills remains center of industrial activity; mill changes ownership during this period, and late in this period or early in the next (1885?) a one-story brick mill (100' x 40') with auxiliary buildings is erected.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Massachusetts Central Division, Boston and Maine Railroad, constructed through Nashua River Valley, with Sawyer's Mills Station, 1890s. Railroad and many roads destroyed with construction of Wachusett Reservoir. In 1898, electric streetcar line opened along length of Main Street from Worcester to Clinton.

B. Population:

Population increases to 895 in 1875 (+95) then regularly declines to 729 in 1895. A surge to 1364, with presence of reservoir construction crews in 1900, followed by a low of 649 in 1905. Increases to 783 by 1915. 101 Irish present in 1875, 42 in 1885. 215 Italian laborers in 1900, 299 in 1902. 37 Swedes are largest foreign-born group in 1905. Catholic chapel built at Sawyer's Mills in 1890. Secular organizations include Farmers & Mechanics Association (1876), Literary Society (1882), Chataqua Club (1893), and Village Improvement Society (1901).

C. Settlement Patterns:

Major event of the period is the construction of Wachusett Reservoir (completed 1905), with flooding of Nashua River Valley and establishment of surrounding watershed pine plantations. 302 people displaced, 46 dwellings moved or destroyed. Sawyer's Mills village erased. Large temporary shanty towns built to house construction workers. Further development in center, with population relocation, and stimulus of streetcar lines. Some late Victorian residences north of center of Main Street. Tenements and cottages constructed on Central Street (1899), apparently for streetcar line workers from nearby carbarn. Sawyer Memorial Library constructed in center (1904). Development of Morningdale area as cottage streetcar suburb of Worcester.

D. Economic Base:

Boylston continued its mix of minor manufacturing, dominated by the Lancaster Companies Cotton mill at Sawyer's Mills, and dairying, orcharding, and gardening until 1899, when the mill and all the Sawyer's Mills village were torn down for the construction of the Wachusett Reservoir. Also taken was the shoe box factory further upstream on the Nashua River. This constituted a sizeable loss in taxable property and resulted in a drop in Boylston population of more than 50% over the next five years. The Reservoir also flooded the tracks of the only railroad through the town, the Southern Division tracks of the Boston and Maine Railroad, erected in 1875.

Despite the virtual elimination of manufacturing, agriculture continued to grow with the demands of the Worcester and Boston markets. In 1895, dairying provided 40% of \$160,000 agricultural income, followed by hay, straw, fodder (29%), vegetables (7%), and poultry (6%). Wood, animal products, and fruit were also important, comprising 8.6%, 7.3%, and 5.7% respectively of 1905's agricultural production. A large creamery and stock farm were established at Straw Hollow during the 1870's and continued into the early 20th century, providing large quantities of milk, butter, cream, cider, and vinegar to Boston markets.

Mining activities took on some importance in Boylston during this period. Coal, resembling that found in Worcester in the late 1820s was discovered in the northwest part of town, but does not appear to have been successfully mined. In the easterly portion of town, a shaft was sunk forty feet into the ground in search of gold. Although an ore containing enough gold to support a profitable operation was discovered, the mine was abandoned in 1882 with the death of its prime mover, Rev. Andrew Bigelow of Southborough. Only the brickworks, reopened in 1885, continued in operation until 1912, when they were also closed.

E. Architecture:

Residential: At the beginning of the period, settlements were clustered at the town center, Sawyer's Mills, and Straw Hollow in the extreme southeast corner of the town. Boylston experienced a surge in population between 1895-1900 due to the arrival of immigrant workers on the Wachusett Reservoir. The population dropped immediately after the completion of the reservoir. The village of Morningdale in the southwest section of town began to develop during this period; one two-story asymmetrical Queen Anne house survives. Late Italianate, modest Queen Anne, and shingled dwellings can be found in the town center. Workers' housing at Sawyer's Mills is recorded as including: one brick block of ten tenements, nine frame buildings, and fourteen tenements, all lost when the reservoir was built.

Institutional: No high school classes were held in Boylston after 1886-87; students attended school in nearby towns; in 1904 a four-room frame consolidated school was erected in the town center (demolished 1957) which replaced the district system; it was designed by Barker & Nourse of Worcester. By 1889, both a Grange and Patrons of Husbandry were established. In 1904, the fieldstone Craftsman Sawyer Memorial Library was constructed; architects: Fuller & Delano, Worcester. Catholic church in existence at Sawyer's Mills.

Commercial: Massachusetts Central Railroad was complete through northern part of town (1879-80) but did not pass through town center. No significant commercial development: corner store in town center continued in operation and there was at least one store in Sawyer's Mills.

Industrial: Between 1885-1912, George Hazzard re-opened brickyard (formerly Howe's) at Route 70 and Cross Street. Entire complex at Sawyer's Mills was destroyed in 1899 for the reservoir.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

By the 1920s, streetcar line is abandoned, as local roads are improved for use as automobile highways. In the early 1930s, Main Street (Route 70) is improved as a major highway from Worcester to Clinton. School Street (Route 140) is improved as the principle highway to Shrewsbury Center and Route 9.

B. Population:

Significant increase (+567) with suburban development from Worcester, from 1920 to 1935 (1361), with period of greatest growth 1930-35 (+264).

C. Settlement Patterns:

Continued development of town as suburb, with construction concentrated at Morningdale. Some recreational cottages built around Rocky Pond. Worcester County Tuberculosis Hospital constructed northeast of Morningdale on border with West Boylston.

D.. Economic Base:

With its manufacturing base all but eliminated by the flooding of the Wachusett Reservoir, Boylston's economy was largely agricultural. Orchards, dairy and stock farms, and market gardens provided the means of livelihood to most of the towns occupants. Increasing numbers of its population probably commuted to work in Worcester.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Little apparent growth; scattered "bungaloid type" houses with fieldstone foundations. Settlement at Morningdale of modest "astyle" dwellings, many one-storied.

Institutional: Two-room frame Colonial Revival schoolhouse constructed in Morningdale (1926). 1926 Catholic Church erected, Morningdale (?). Fourth Congregational Church built in center replacing 1835 structure which burned in 1924, architect: Edwin T. Chapin, Worcester.

Commercial: No growth apparent; corner store in center (1811) burns in 1929 and is replaced with present four-square structure which still serves as general store.

Industrial: No expansion; town retains appearance of undeveloped agricultural community.