

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

BRIMFIELD

Report Date: 1982

Associated Regional Report: Connecticut Valley

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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MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

DATE: December, 1982

COMMUNITY: Brimfield

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Brimfield is situated within a complex of rugged highlands which border the Connecticut River Valley. Locally, the grain of these highlands extends north/south into Warren and Stafford, Connecticut, respectively. River bottomlands run north/south along Brimfield's western line and west/east and north/south in the town's eastern half. A limited amount of swamp occurs in the eastern portion of Brimfield. The drainage in the town's western half extends south and west via the Quabaug River which ultimately feeds into the Ware River. In the eastern half, the drainage ultimately feeds into the Ware River. In the eastern half, the drainage extends west and south along the Quinebaug River and its Tributaries. Water resources were restricted to these two water ways. Two small natural ponds and the Brimfield Reservoir. Loamy soil occurs in the vicinity of Tower and Marsh Hills. The soil is rocky east and west of this hill complex. It becomes increasingly sandy and gravelly south of tower and Marsh Hills.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Originally included within ten mile radius of Winthrop Leadmine grant in 1644 (Tantiusque Deed) and northeast section apparently within Eliot Purchase of 1655 (Connole, Figure 5). Founded as plantation adjoining Springfield in 1710 with western boundary along Quabaug River (Palmer). Established as independent town of Brimfield by 1714 including present area of Monson, Wales and Holland. Eastern boundary originally with Brookfield (Warren) in 1701 extended east to Sturbridge line in 1717. Western boundary established with separation of Monson in 1760 and southern boundary with separation of South Brimfield (Wales and Holland) in 1762.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Rural upland town on primary corridor between Worcester and Springfield. Located on divide between Quinebaug and Quabaug Rivers with important native site documented at Sherman Pond and noted trail landmark of Steerage Rock on Bay Path. Initial settlement from Springfield during early 18th century with town center established at head of Quinebaug valley after aborted hilltop locations. Late colonial period houses survive in authentic agricultural landscapes along axis of Brookfield Road to Brimfield Center. Limited development during Federal period as primary corridor of trolley and aborted railroad lines in early 20th century, now reflect road beds with concrete bridges. Early Modern development limited to east/west Route 20 corridor through town center with surviving period boys camp and summer cottages around Little Alum Pond. At present, historic period landscapes

remain intact, especially at Brimfield town center and Sherman Pond isolated by Mass Pike corridor, although indications of commercialization are evident from Sturbridge Village expansion in East Brimfield and limited suburbanization of upland sites with attractive vistas.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes

Native trails reported through area, primarily east/west as part of regional system between Quabaug Ond (Brookfield) and Chicopee River (Palmer). Focus of routes appears to be located around Sherman Pond-Indian Hill as part of Bay Path with connecting link to Steerage Rock (Holland, p.19; Hyde, p.68; Temple, Pp. 24-25; Marlow, p.77). Probable trail routes from Sherman Pond included Brookfield Road and portions of East Hill Road to Little Alum Pond. Route over Steerage Rock remains unclear with conjectured portions along segments of Brimfield Road from Tower Hill and possibly Dunhamtown Road along Bottle Brook to Chicopee River. A secondary focus of trails appears around Little Alum Pond, possibly as portions of Chanpaux Road and Little Alum Pond Road, Although not documented, a major east-west trail route appears probable along Quinebaug River through Brimfield town center and west along Mill Stream to Chicopee River following present course of Route 20. Branches are conjecture south to Holland as East Brimfield Road past Green Pond, and to Wales as Hollow Road along Hollow Brook meadow.

B. Settlement Pattern

A probable Contact period village sit extended from the northern shore of Sherman Pond to the southern portion of Marsh Hill (Indian Hill). Indian Hill was reputedly the location of "Quabaug Old Fort", a probable native Contact/Plantation period stronghold. Steerage Rock, the town's highest point (1205 feet), is claimed to have been utilized by area natives as a key vantage point. Additional native settlement likely concentrated along the fertile Quinebaug and Quabaug River valleys, Tower and Haynes Hills and Little Alum Pond.

C. Subsistence Pattern

Extensive agricultural land was situated primarily in the Quinebaug and Quabaug river valleys and the moderate uplands, particularly Tower and Marsh Hills. Extensive native planting grounds were reputedly located at the latter two sites. Good potential for freshwater fishing existed on the Quabaug and Quinebaug Rivers and their tributaries. Native hunting probably occurred in Brimfield's rugged uplands and marshland.

D. Observations

A moderate sized native population probably inhabited Brimfield during this period. The area's fertile river valleys and moderately sloping hills were attractive features for native

settlement. The Brimfield's natives were probably part of the larger settlement node located to the northeast and adjacent to the fresh pond and river complex present in the Brookfield's, reputed home of the Quabaugs. Regionally, the Quabaugs appear to fall under the domain of the Nipmucks. The potential for surviving native period sites is excellent due to the limited development throughout the town's history. Particular attention should be paid to the archaeologically sensitive Sherman Pond, Marsh and Tower Hills area.

V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes

Native trails remain as major regional routes with primary link of Bay Path east-west from Brookfield to Springfield to Sherman Pond and Steerage Rock reported in town histories (Holland, p. 19, Hyde, P. 68; Temple, pp. 24-25; Marlow, p.77) A major east-west route also appears likely along Quinebaug River to Chicopee Valley following present course of Route 20.

B. Population

There were no estimates of the native population during this period. However, it is likely the local native community suffered substantial losses during the 1630's when epidemics ravaged the Connecticut River valley native populace.

C. Settlement Pattern

Colonial settlement did not occur until the early 18th century. Native settlement is not well documented during this period. The only reference to native settlement was to the Quabaug Old Fort site. This location remained the site of an extensive native village at least through King Phillip's War.

D. Economic Base

The native populace probably continued to focus on the traditional native pursuits of horticulture, hunting and fishing. However, local natives were likely drawn into the commercial fur trade established by William Pynchon in the Springfield area during the late 1630s.

E. Observations

The Plantation period native community is almost as poorly understood as that of the Contact period. Future research should clarify the impact the epidemics of the 1630s and the development of the fur trade had on the local natives. Peter Thomas's dissertation, "In the Mainstream of Change/The Indian Trade and Cultural Process in the Middle Connecticut River Valley: 1635-1665", is one of the few sources that provides a general understanding of how the local native population may have fared during the Plantation period. Historical and archaeological research should be undertaken to more clearly define the extent

and character of the Sherman Pond/Quabaug Old Fort Plantation period village.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes

Establishment of Brimfield town center along Mill Brook (Quinebaug River Valley) reoriented native trail system from Sherman Pond to meetinghouse. Radial highway network from town center created in 1730s including Pace Hill and Haynes Hill Roads to South Brimfield (Wales and Holland), Tower Hill Road to Warren and East Hill and Brookfield Roads to Brookfield over native paths. An important east-west regional route improved through Brimfield center following present course of Route 20 with sections of original location intact as Old Palmer Road and abandoned loops near East Brimfield. A secondary highway located along Quabaug River as West Brimfield-Palmer Roads connecting Warren to Palmer.

B. Population

The limited evidence suggests a small native population remained in post-war Brimfield. There were no figures available for the Colonial population. The majority of the first settlers were former Springfield residents.

C. Settlement Pattern

Native settlement appears to have continued in the Sherman Pond/Marsh Hill area at least through King Philip's War. King Phillip is said to have south refuge at the Quabaug Old Fort during the war.

Colonial settlement was initiated when the Massachusetts General Court granted permission to a small group of Springfield residents (including John Pynchon) to lay out an eight mile square township in 1701. The original bounds encompassed the present towns of Monson, Brimfield, Wales and Holland, however, very little settlement occurred during the first quarter of the 18th century as a result of legal disputes over property within the tract and the threat of native attack. Increased settlement began in the late 1720s and early 1730s. The focal point of this settlement was in the vicinity of the junction of Routes 19, 20 and Brookfield Road. The town's first meetinghouse (C. 1722), cemetery (Lumbard Lot, c. 1720) and first and second pounds (C. 1746, c. 1762) were all situated in this general area. The site's proximity to fertile river bottom lands, moderate uplands (Rise, Tower and Marsh Hills) and freshwater sources were undoubtedly prime factors in this choice. Little data is provided concerning later settlement. However, the rugged nature of most of Brimfield strongly suggests the majority of the period settlers established homes near the town's geographical center. Additional homes may have been erected along the Quabaug and Quinebaug Rivers, to the northwest and southeast, respectively. It is unclear what effect the Indian Wars of the first half of the 18th century had on Brimfield.

D. Economic Base

No reference to the economic pursuits of the post-war natives. The colonial community focused primarily on agriculture. Development of an extensive mill industry was hampered by the lack of fall power on the majority of the town's rivers and streams. At least two pre-1775 mills were built on Elbow Brook (now Foskett Mill Stream), the earliest predating C. 1753. A possible pre-1775 pottery may have operated adjacent to the southern end of Sherman Pond.

E. Architecture

Residential: While Brimfield was settled early in the 18th century, no houses of the Colonial period are known to have survived. The only house observed in town which may date from the 18th century is a two-story, center chimney house with intergral lean-to and three-bay facade standing on East Hill Road, just east of the present town center. Other houses possibly dating from the period were observed on Brookfield Road. These include a number of center chimney houses of both three and five bays width; for most of these, however, Federal period construction dates are recommended.

Institutional: The first meetinghouse in Brimfield was constructed in 1721. A 40 foot x 45 foot structure, the meetinghouse stood throughout the Colonial period. Seven school districts were established in 1753; by 1766, the number of districts had increased to 10. As far as is known the only one school was built in the period in 1742.

F. Observations

Brimfield was the earliest town established on the eastern periphery of the Connecticut River valley. Locally, it served as the center of Old Brimfield. However, the town's limited economic base and isolated position suggests that Brimfield retained strong social and economic ties with the mother town of Springfield. Future research should explore the extent of these ties in addition to filling out the town's poorly researched post-1731 development. Furthermore, an architectural survey of Brimfield should be undertaken. To date, the town lacks any architectural inventory. Archaeologically there is an excellent likelihood of the survival of the town's Colonial core because of limited development on this area.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes

Brimfield town center remained as the focus of highway routes. Period improvements include north/south link to South Brimfield (Wales) as Route 19 between Haynes and Pace Hills and connecting links over West Mountain as Saint Claire-Dunhamtown-Brimfield Roads. No turnpikes constructed through area, although major

east-west highways remains along Route 20 through center from Sturbridge to Palmer.

B. Population

Brimfield reached its peak population in 1820 with 1,612 persons. The decade 1810-20 had been one of unusual growth for the town, with a 21.6 percent growth rate in that decade alone. By 1830, with a population of 1,599 the town had begun a slow decline which lasted until 1910.

C. Settlement Patterns

Brimfield town center remained as focus of civic activities. Secondary economic villages expanded around mill sites at East Brimfield and Fentonville.

D. Economic Base

Predominantly agricultural town with large quantities of rye, corn, beans, butter, beef, and pork produced. Much of the surplus was carted to Boston for sale. Four sawmills and one distillery also in operation in 1804.

Early cotton and woolen mill established by local investors in East Brimfield, 1815, merged with Monson interests in 1821 as Monson & Brimfield Woolen Manufacturing Company. Joseph Hall was the first agent, about 1822. About the same time Hall was advising Edmund Dwight on the location of the Boston and Springfield Manufacturing Company at Chicopee Falls, becoming its first agent when that mill opened about 1825. Another Monson connection was in the person of Joseph L. Reynolds. Reynolds was a Rhode Island mechanic from Coventry, who had worked under Eli Whitney on his War of 1812 musket contract at Whitneyville Connecticut. About 1820 Reynolds was in Brimfield "and there first engaged in the manufacture of cotton sheeting, having special charge of the newly invented power-looms". A year later Reynolds moved to Monson as general overseer of the Hampden Cotton Manufacturing Company.

Tanning had been established in the Colonial period, and shoe-making had been an early Brimfield industry. According to Hyde's Centennial History, "The first boots offered for sale in Harfort and other cities in the south, "ready-made", were made in Brimfield, by the firm of P. Warren and Son." By 1837, the town would report over \$58,000 worth of boots and shoes produced - the highest value of any town in Hampden County.

E. Architecture

Residential: A great deal of residential construction occurred in the Federal period with many houses built at the town center and along outlying roads. The houses standing at the town center, many date from the Federal period. Among these are several substantial houses, some including brick construction. In general, the earlier houses are simpler structures, most with

center chimney uplands and five bay wide facades. A few houses incorporated pyramidal hip or hip roofs. At least one house at the town center exhibits the twin rearwall chimneys, a feature not commonly used in the region; a few federal houses with brick end walls incorporating chimneys were also constructed at the town center. At least one house at the town center includes a one story shed roof wrap around veranda, apparently dating from the period. In addition to houses at the town center, a number of farm houses were built along Brookfield Road; almost all of these are center chimney plan structures of either three or five bays width. Other period houses were noted on Brimfield Road, on Palmer Road at West Brimfield, on Route 19 and on Route 20 at East Brimfield. Cottages were also built in these same locations; all are center chimney plan structures of five of four bays width. At least one cottage incorporating small eyebrow windows in the upper half-story was noted on Route 20 west of the town center.

Institutional: the second meetinghouse in the town was built in 1806 to replace the 1721 meetinghouse; contemporary descriptions state that the building had a columned facade but no other details are known. In 1824, a brick schoolhouse was built in the town; it stood until 1866. Eight schoolhouses are indicated on the 1830 map.

Commercial: In 1808, a hotel was established at the town center; at least five other tavern/hotels were indicated on the 1830 map, two at the town center and one at East Brimfield. The structures at the town center are thought to survive; a federal house with a one-story veranda on Route 20 southeast of the center is thought to be one of the surviving taverns.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes

Mainline of Western Railroad between Worcester and Springfield located along Quabaug River Valley through West Brimfield in 1839. No other railroads constructed through area and town center remained isolated from period transportation improvements.

B. Population

Brimfield's population continued its decline, losing almost a fifth of its 1830 population by 1870. By 1855, the town had a 6.5 percent immigrant population of whom three-quarters were Irish. In 1870, the population stood at 1,288.

C. Settlement Patterns

Town center maintained as civic focus with secondary villages around milling activities at East Brimfield and Fentonville. Location of Western Railroad along Quaboag River created depot village at West Brimfield by end of the period.

D. Economic Base

The house industry reached its peak in 1837, reporting 175 men and women employed. Eight years later only 26 remained, and by 1855 the business had disappeared altogether, though one currying shop and a maker of shoe tacks survived. The cotton mill passed through a series of owners until 1856, when it was taken over by a maker of shoemakers' tools, and after 1865, machines for pegging shoes. Stockinet (a knitted woolen fabric) was manufactured at the site of the town's first gristmill on Elbow Brook, though the mill was not a success. In 1863, spurred probably by Civil War demands, William R. Parks purchased the property, erecting a small mill village of boarding house and tenements. By 1865 the mill was turning out \$75,000 worth of wool tweed--much the largest product value in town. After the war, however, competition from other mills probably cut heavily into Parks' profits and when the factory burned in 1845, it was not rebuilt.

Brickmaking established in West Brimfield by 1845, by the end of the period had become one of the town's most valued industries, measured in terms of product value. Other products included charcoal (for Blanchard's scythe works in Palmer), harness hames, cider brandy, cheese, butter, milk and apples.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Clustered settlement at the town center includes a high proportion of period houses. Houses of the period were also built in smaller numbers at Fentonville and East Brimfield and along Brookfield Road, the major focus of agricultural activity in the period. A few elaborately embellished and stylish houses were built at the town center, with both frame and brick examples known. The two most notable houses stand on Route 20 at the town center and on Route 19 just south of the center. Both appear to date from the 1830's as they combine Greek Revival temple front facades with small scale elaborate Federal details such as quoins and pilasters with Ionic capitals. Both incorporate sidehall plans and endwall chimneys; the Route 19 house is of brick construction. The plans and endwall chimneys; the Route 19 house is of brick construction. The remaining houses in the town are generally simple structures, approximately equally divided between double chimney, five bay plan and sidehall plan structures. In addition to these houses, most of which are well articulated examples of the Greek Revival and Italianate styles, simple vernacular houses were built in modest numbers as well. In general, these are either five-bay wide cottages with kneewall framed half stories or two bay wide structures with prominent side ells containing an entrance. Notable houses of the period include a two and a half-story Greek Revival house at the town center, unusual for its one and a half story projecting gable end and a square plan hip roof Italianate house on Brookfield Road.

Institutional: Two outstanding institutional buildings were built at the town center during the period. These are the Congregational Church (1848) and the Hitchcock Free Academy (1855). The church is a two-story Greek Revival structure with a

Doric portico in antis and a three part steeple consisting of two square stages and a spire. The Hitchcock Free Academy is a two-story Greek Revival structure with a Doric portico in antis and a three part steeple consisting of two square stages and a spire. The Hitchcock Free Academy is a two-story Greek Revival structure with a Doric portico in antis and a three part steeple consisting of two square stages and a spire. The Hitchcock Free Academy is a two-story Italianate building with bracketed eaves, corners quoins and a central cupola; a two-story wing extends to the rear. In addition to those structures, the Adventist chapel (1866) a small center entrance Italianate Building, stands off East Brimfield Road. No other institutional buildings are known to survive. Other institutional construction of the period included a Moravian church (organized 1855) built in 1857 and replaced in 1866, a 60' x 30' school built in 1866, and additions to the Almshouse (established 1837) completed in 1851.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Improvement of east-west corridor through town center with electric interurban trolley route from Sturbridge to Palmer by 1908. Portions of private right of way survive along Quinebaug River Valley, including concrete bridge at Mill Brook (Holland Road). Mainline of Southern New England Railroad constructed parallel to trolley route as major east-west link between Springfield and Providence. Roadbed abandoned in 1912 from Titanic disaster. Holland Road constructed as north/south link to Holland.

B. Population:

Brimfield's population continued its decline, losing almost a third in the forty years to 1910. Beginning in 1910, however, the town's population began to rise, and by 1915 the resident count stood at 934. In 1905, 13 percent of the population were foreign-born, with the largest numbers being French Canadians and Irish.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Brimfield center remained as focus of town activities with secondary villages at Fentonville and East Brimfield.

D. Economic Base:

Brimfield turned increasingly to the production of dairy products in the Late Industrial period. In 1870 the Brimfield Cheese Factory Company was organized. By 1880, the town was second in cheese production in the county after Blandford, and the two towns together supplied more than half of the county production. Brimfield was also second to Blandford in butter production that year, fourth in hay, and eighth in milk.

The Snell Manufacturing Company had taken over the old East Brimfield mill to make ship augers, while F.F. March & Co. took over the brickyard at West Brimfield.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Relatively little development took place at the town center. Most development was centered at Fentonville and West Brimfield with a small number of vernacular Queen Anne and Colonial Revival Cottages built along Route 20, Dunhamtown/Palmer and West Brimfield Roads. After the turn of the century, resort development began to occur at Little Alum and Sherman Ponds. In those locations, very simple one-story gable, hip or gambrel roof cottages were built in small numbers from c. 1901 to 1915.

Institutional: The most outstanding institutional buildings of the period are the Public Library (c. 1905) and the Town Hall (1879). A two-and-a-half story structure located on Route 20 opposite the Congregational Church, the Town Hall is an elaborately conceived example of the Stick Style, with a complex roofline augmented with dormers and gables, applied stickwork and a corner entrance tower. The library is a one-story hip roofed Craftsman style building constructed of cobblestones and incorporating Tudor Revival wooden trim. It is located opposite the Town Hall. The only other potential institutional building surviving is a one-and-a-half story structure, now a residence, on West Brimfield/Palmer Road; this may have been a school..

Commercial: Several of the one and two story frame stores at the town center were probably built ca. 1910.

X. MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Abandonment of interurban trolley system through Brimfield center and improvement of local highways as regional auto routes. Major east-west highway U.S. Route 20 through Brimfield center follows Colonial road with portions of highway on abandoned trolley route along Foskett Mill Brook in Fentonville as divided roadway (1938). Secondary north/south highway Route 19 through town center to Wales.

B. Population

After a loss probably associated with World War I, Brimfield continued to make substantial population gains. By 1940, the population stood at 1,012, 8.3 percent above the figure in 1915.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Brimfield town center retained position as civic core with growth of commercial highway activities along Route 20 in West Brimfield and Fentonville. Recreational summer homes developed around Little Alum Pond and Sherman Pond by end of the period.

D. Economic Base:

No new industries identified. By 1930, Brimfield's only industry was the brickmaking plant owned by Philais H. Provencal, employing thirty hands.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Very little residential construction occurred in the period, except at the ponds in the eastern half of the town. At both Sherman and Little Alum Ponds, simple one-story cottages were built in the 1920's. Most of these are faced with grooved "novelty" siding and exhibit either hip or gable roofs. Such cottages were also built along Little Alum Road, Route 20 and on Dunhamtown/Palmer Road. Perhaps the finest residence of the period is a hip roofed shingled Craftsman cottage on Dunhamtown/Palmer Road.

Institutional: The only institutional building known for the period is the Springfield Boys Club on Route 20. The main building is a Greek Revival house, but surrounding barns and dormitories appear to date from the 1920's.

Commercial: a few commercial buildings of one and two stories height were built in the 1920's. In addition, a well-preserved two-story roadhouse of the 1920's was observed on Palmer Road in the Western half of town.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

Brimfield has no completed inventory forms. Survey efforts should document primary settlements at the town center and along Brookfield Road. District potential exists in both areas. Individually eligible structures stand on Route 19 (Greek Revival/Italianate brick house) and on East Hill Road (18th century farmhouse).

XII. SOURCES

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