

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

BERKLEY

Report Date: 1981

Associated Regional Report: Southeast Massachusetts

Reconnaissance Survey Town Reports, produced for MHC's Statewide Reconnaissance Survey between 1979 and 1987, introduce the historical development of each of the Commonwealth's municipalities. Each report begins with an historic overview, a description of topography, and political boundaries. For the purposes of the survey, the historic period has been subdivided into seven periods: Contact (1500–1620), Plantation (1620–1675), Colonial (1675–1775), Federal (1775–1830), Early Industrial (1830–1870), Late Industrial (1870–1915), and Early Modern (1915–1940/55). Each report concludes with survey observations that evaluate the town's existing historic properties inventory and highlight significant historic buildings, settlement patterns, and present threats to these resources. A bibliography lists key secondary resources.

Town reports are designed for use together with a series of town maps that demarcate settlement patterns, transportation corridors and industrial sites for each historic period. These maps are in the form of color-coded, polyester overlays to the USGS topographic base map for each town on file and available for consultation at MHC. For further information on the organization and preparation of town reports, readers should contact MHC.

Users should keep in mind that these reports are now two decades or more old. The information they contain, including assessments of existing knowledge, planning recommendations, understanding of local development, and bibliographic references all date to the time they were written. In some cases, information on certain topics was not completed. No attempt has been made to update this information.

Electronic text was not available for digital capture, and as a result most of the reports have been scanned as PDF files. While all have been processed with optical character recognition, there will inevitably be some character recognition errors.

The activity that is the subject of the MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report has been financed in part with Federal funds from the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. However, the contents and opinions do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of the Interior. This program receives Federal financial assistance for identification and protection of historic properties. Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Age Discrimination Act of 1975, as amended, the U.S. Department of the Interior prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, disability or age in its federally assisted programs. If you believe you have been discriminated against in any program, activity or facility as described above, or if you desire further information please write to: Office of Equal Opportunity, National Park Service, 1849 C Street, N.W., Washington, D.C., 20240.



MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION

William Francis Galvin, Secretary of the Commonwealth

Chair, Massachusetts Historical Commission

220 Morrissey Blvd.

Boston, MA 02125

www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc

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

MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

Date: October 1981

Community: Berkley

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Bounded on the west by the Taunton River there are a number of small streams in the town. Drainage in the center via Quaker Brook and in the west by the Cotley River. Highly dissected hills along the Taunton River; otherwise the terrain is gently rolling. Swamp lands along all streams. Soils exceedingly stony.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Established as a town on April 18, 1735 (o.s.) from parts of Dighton and Taunton. Annexed Assonet Neck from Dighton 1799. Annexed parts of Taunton in 1810 and 1842. Annexed Myricksville section from Taunton in 1879.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Berkley is a rural community in Bristol County. Potential contact period native sites. First settlement period satellite of Taunton. Some marine-based activity during first settlement and colonial periods, major economic base was agriculture.

While there was some shipbuilding activity in West Berkley (Bridge Village) in the first half of the 19th century the town remained committed to an agricultural base throughout the century. Out migration was epidemic during the late 18th and 19th century so much so that by 1872 there were no descendents of original settlers left in the town. Population increases occurred primarily through the annexation of territory from Dighton and Taunton. The town retains an 18th century landscape despite some suburbanization and its agricultural character.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500 - 1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

A native trail reportedly followed the present route of Berkley Street, extending as far South as Shore's Creek (immediately north of Hospital Hill). A conjectural route may have branched off the northern portion of the Berkley Street route and extended south along North Main and Elm Street, the latter intersecting with the Berkley Street route. Both of these trails passed through the heavily settled native area extending from Elm Street to the southern tip of Assonet Neck.

B. Settlement Pattern:

There were no reported native Contact Period sites. However, an early 18th century historian stated that the Berkeley area, particularly

Assonet Neck, was a heavily populated native settlement area (date?). Archeological evidence of native settlement was concentrated between Elm Street and the Dighton Rock State Park. Included were an extensive site with a possible Woodland/Contact Period component between Elm and Point Streets and a large Archaic/Woodland Period village site adjacent to Shore's Creek. Contact Period settlement may also have occurred in the vicinity of the Dighton Rock, an area from which large quantities of unidentified native artifacts have been recovered. E. B. Delabarre reported in 1939 as many as 80,000 "Indian cornhills" present on Assonet Neck. Since then, several have been reported near the intersection of Bayview Avenue and Grinnel Street and south of Camp Merriwood (MHC Prehistoric file). Additional native Contact Period settlement may have taken place north of these areas, concentrating along the eastern shore of the Taunton River.

C. Subsistence Base:

The Berkeley area was an excellent source of land based and marine resources. The extensive coastline, Taunton and Assonet Rivers were rich sources of shellfish, fish and water fowl. As mentioned previously, there was extensive evidence of native cultivation on Assonet Neck. Potential native agricultural land was present adjacent to and north of Bryant Hill and Padelford Street. There is a high probability of European-Indian trade due in large part to the area's considerable coastline and access to Narragansett Bay, a region of considerable pre-1620 European-native contact.

D. Observations:

There is an excellent likelihood of largescale native Contact Period settlement in Berkley when considering the area's diversified resource base and the archeological and documentary evidence. Furthermore, the Berkley area may have been occupied temporarily by European fishermen and explorers. The native settlement may have functioned as a sub-regional (southeastern Massachusetts) population center roughly equivalent to Titicut, a Contact/Historic Period settlement located on the Bridgewater and Middleborough sides of the Taunton River. The local community likely fell under the control of the Pokanokets situated in Montaup (Mt. Hope, Rhode Island). The continued rural nature of the present community suggests a strong possibility of surviving native Contact Period sites, particularly on and immediately above Assonet Neck.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620 - 1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

No documentation of pre-1675 colonial routes. The pre-1675 white community probably utilized the Berkley Street native trail (reputedly used by the settlers prior to the town's incorporation) as an access route to present Taunton. An additional primary route which may have connected the settlement with Taunton extended along North and South Main Streets and Bayview Avenue. Berkley's earliest cemetery is situated on the

eastern side of Bayview Avenue. The Taunton and Assonet Rivers provided the settlers with a water route to Taunton, Bridgewater, Middleborough and the Narragansett Bay.

B. Population:

No figures for the native or white population.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Native settlement probably continued although greatly diminished by the widespread early 17th century epidemics which decimated the natives of southern New England.

Colonial settlement is poorly documented. The initial date of pre-war settlement is unclear although it is known that a small colonial community was well established by 1675. The first settlers were undoubtedly attracted by the area's extensive marine resources, woodland and agricultural land. Initial settlement probably occurred near the Fox cemetery, the site of previous native settlement, considerable agricultural land and proximity to Assonet and Taunton Rivers. Local and Taunton settlers harvested the salt grass along the Assonet Neck, utilizing it for livestock fodder. The settlers probably fished and collected shellfish along the Assonet and Taunton Rivers. Subsistence hunting and lumbering probably took place in the area's woodlands. Some trade likely occurred between the white community and the native population. The lack of water sources powerful enough to operate mill industries undoubtedly discouraged the establishment of mill operations.

E. Observations:

The limited data makes it difficult to assess the Berkley area's importance as a First Settlement Period native settlement. The Colonial community functioned primarily as a satellite of Taunton largely because of the presence of former Taunton residents, the area's lack of civic/religious and industrial facilities and its vulnerability to native attack. The Berkley area's proximity to the Narragansett Bay region points to the likelihood of strong economic connections with Bay communities. The low degree of development in the vicinity of Bayview Avenue indicates an excellent likelihood of extant archeological evidence of the original settlement node.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675 - 1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

No data concerning Colonial Period transportation routes.

B. Population:

There were no figures for a native population. The colonial settlement had 659 residents in 1765. This figure increased to 787 residents in 1776.

C. Settlement Patterns:

It is unclear where and how late native settlement continued in Berkley. In 1730, a historian studying the Dighton Rock referred to elderly native informants who appear to have been Berkley area residents.

White settlement is also somewhat hazy. The community was abandoned at the outbreak of King Philip's War and residents sought shelter in present Taunton. At least one resident was killed by hostile Indians. Property damage is unclear. Resettlement probably took place in the last quarter of the 17th century in and around the original settlement area. The earliest gravestone in the Fox cemetery dated to 1704. Additional homes were erected in this area throughout the 18th century. A new settlement node and town center was established approximately one mile north of the original center at the junction of North Main and Sanford Streets sometime prior to 1735. The first meetinghouse was built at the junction of these streets in c. 1735. Up until this date, area residents journeyed to Dighton and Taunton for town meetings and religious services.

D. Economic Base:

Minimal description of Berkley's economy. Farming was probably maintained as the primary economic pursuit of area residents, with increased emphasis on commercial production. Marine based activities likely continued. Establishment of trade with the West Indies appeared to have occurred by the mid-late 18th century (Sanford 1872: 34). Coastal shipping likely expanded as a consequence of the cessation of Anglo-Indian hostilities and Berkley's 18th century growth. The existence of considerable marine based economic operations suggests that local small scale shipbuilding may have occurred as early as the first half of the 18th century despite the fact that formal ship construction did not commence until c. 1790 (Hurd 1883: 182). Berkley continued to lack mill industry.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Berkley has comparatively few surviving 18th century buildings. The town was apparently very sparsely settled through the Colonial period and only one road is shown on the 1794 map, so the number of houses built in the period was probably very small; only four two-story Colonial houses were inventoried and no more were observed. Of these, all are presently of central-chimney plan with one house believed to have been constructed as a half house and then later enlarged. Projecting pedimented enclosed porches and end-gable overhangs were used on the town's houses; both features were introduced in the 1750s and used regionally as late as the 1790s. Given Berkley's belated development, it is unlikely that any of the houses incorporating these features in the town were built much before the end of the period. A very small number of Colonial period center-chimney cottages were inventoried, but they are a fairly common housetype in the town and it is possible that more examples than were inventoried may date from the period.

Institutional: At the time of Berkley's incorporation (1735), the first meetinghouse (40' x 34' x 18') was constructed. This stood throughout the period. No other institutional buildings are recorded.

F. Observations:

Despite Berkley's growth and subsequent early 18th century incorporation, there was little evidence suggesting substantial diversification of the town's economic base. The community essentially remained a rural backwater and probably retained close economic ties with Taunton. Berkley's provincial nature during this period is graphically illustrated by the crudely carved, undecorated early 18th century gravestones present in the Fox cemetery. Future research should clarify the town's development during the Colonial Period because of the inadequate coverage provided by existing secondary sources.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775 - 1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Improvement of existing colonial period roads, no federal period turnpikes. Taunton River remains principle means of contact with the rest of the world.

B. Population:

Population stable 1776 to 1790, increase in 1800, stable to 1820, then decline in 1830. 1800 increase probably due to acquisition of Assonet Neck.

C. Settlement:

During this period Berkley was primarily a farming community with a linear settlement pattern along colonial period roads. West Berkley, otherwise known as Bridge Village, had a small shipbuilding based settlement. In 1800 there were 115 houses in the town. Center Village, North Burt Neighborhood (Burt's Corners) and Assonet Neck were small hamlets during this period.

D. Economic Base:

Shipbuilding is said to have been commenced here by Samuel Tobey about 1790, initiating an industry which became a major business of the town for three quarters of a century, producing about 100 ships from Berkley yards. Although there were mills on Burt and Macomber streets by 1830, the town was virtually destitute of any useful waterpower capable of development. Shove and Osborn potteries on Assonet Neck, begun early 18th century by potters from Danvers, still active through mid 19th century.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Less than a half dozen Federal houses were observed in the town. Of these, at least two end-chimney, hip-roofed houses are

known, with an equal number of center-chimney plan houses. What is probably the town's most outstanding Federal period house is a center-chimney, hip-roofed house standing on Elm Street at the Berkley/Dighton bridge; it is abandoned and in deteriorating condition. In addition to two-story houses, a number of Federal period cottages were also observed, with some dozen examples known across the town. Center and end-chimney plan cottages were observed in almost equal numbers. Of the town's cottages, the finest is a gambrel-roofed, center-chimney cottage ornamented with quoins standing at Myricks in the eastern half of town; its gambrel roof suggests a construction date early in the Federal period.

Institutional: The town's first meetinghouse was replaced in 1798 with a larger building which incorporated a steeple and three-bay frontispiece. The meetinghouse was designed by a local builder, Isaac Babbitt, also the builder of many bridges in the region during the Federal period. In 1794, Berkley had four school districts with four schools built in 1794 at a cost of £120. With the annexation of Assonet Neck in 1799, three additional school districts came into the system.

Industrial: The first bridge at West Berkley was a toll bridge built by Isaac Babbitt in 1806.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830 - 1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

No new road construction.

B. Population:

Mild fluctuations during this period; however, population follows a general decline to the end of period. Negligible foreign born population in 1855.

C. Settlement:

Very little growth during this period; in 1870 there were 122 houses in town, an increase of 7 since 1800. Settlement patterns remained linear during this period.

D. Economic Base:

Shipbuilding continued throughout the period, though probably reached peak in the years 1830-40. Some shoemaking also carried on, but by less than a dozen men and women at any one time. In 1865, 125 women were recorded sewing braid for straw hat and bonnet factories in other towns. Berkley was almost exclusively an agricultural town and as such reported 129 farms in 1865, producing Indian corn, potatoes, and various fruits.

The construction of the New Bedford & Taunton Railroad (1839-40) through Myricks was followed in 1844-46 by the Fall River Railroad's line through the same village (then a part of Taunton), making Myricks an

important railroad junction. However, the proximity of Middleborough and Taunton seems to have mitigated against Myricks' developing a significant commercial or industrial life. In 1858 some commerce was brought to Myricks by the establishment there of the Bristol County Central Cattle Show and Fair, though the annual event lasted only 18 years and closed before the district was annexed to Berkley.

E. Architecture:

Residential: A number of modest houses and cottages were built in Berkley in the Early Industrial period. Most of these are sidehall or center-entrance, end-chimney Greek Revival/Italianate cottages. Fully developed Greek Revival cottages are very rare, except at Myricks, where several well-detailed end-chimney Greek Revival cottages with fretwork entrance surrounds were observed. Particularly common is the use of a central gable which marks a number of the town's mid-19th century Italianate cottages, some dozen examples of which were observed. Also common is the use of a pair of roundhead windows in the gable; both features are employed in one cottage at the town center, on Porter Road, a story-and-a-half Greek Revival/Italianate cottage. Only one elaborately detailed two-story house is known, a double chimney Italianate house on South Main Street, probably built c. 1865. One Gothic Revival cottage was observed at Myricks.

Institutional: The major institutional change of the period was the withdrawal in 1848 of the Trinitarian faction from the Congregational church; the belatedness of that event is an indication of Berkley's backwater character. The Town House standing at the center is a one-story Greek Revival/Italianate center-entrance building, identical in appearance to schools of the period, which function it may also once have had. The present Congregational church appears to have been constructed during the period, but it may be the 1798 meetinghouse with the later addition of Romanesque Revival roundhead windows (no mention is made in the local history of a new meetinghouse having been built in the period). It is a story-and-a-half structure with a shallowly projecting entrance porch and two-stage steeple on a square base. A Greek Revival Methodist meetinghouse was built at Myricks during the period; the story-and-a-half structure with pedimented gable, center-entrance front with pilasters and two-stage square steeple, stands at Church and Myricks Streets.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Railroad acquired with annexation of Myricksville in 1879.

B. Population:

Population shows increase in 1880 (due to annexation of Myricks in 1879) then remains stable to end of period. Foreign born population 49 in 1885 increases to 177 in 1915; largest ethnic minority were the Portugese in 1915.

C. Settlement:

Annexation of Myricksville from Taunton in 1879 results in acquisition of railroad transferpoint and almost doubles the number of residences in the town. Elsewhere the settlement patterns remain linear with small hamlets; West Berkley had 17 houses, the Center 12 in 1872.

D. Economic Base:

Relatively little identified change in Berkley's economic development. In 1873 the Berkley-Dighton Bridge, torn down in 1853 because of its obstruction of river traffic, was re-established; the present swing bridge was built in 1896. In 1879 the Myricks district was annexed to the town from Taunton.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Most of the houses built in the Late Industrial period are sidehall story-and-a-half or two-story houses with modest Queen Anne detail. A few cottages with mansard roofs are known but most houses and cottages of the early years of the period retain Italianate detailing. The largest concentration of period houses in Berkley (and one of only four clusters of houses in the town) stands on North Main Street at the extreme northern edge of town.

Institutional: A Public Library was built at the town center on Main Street during the period; a story-and-a-half brick structure with stucco and half-timbered trim and a Craftsman entrance hood, the Library was probably constructed c. 1910. A story-and-a-half Italianate school (c. 1880) stands at Myrick.

Commercial: Only one store is known to have been founded in the period, at Myricks in 1883; it is not known whether the building still stands.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915 - 1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

No state highways designated, no appreciable road construction.

B. Population:

Slight increase between 1920 and 1930 then stable to end of period. Not until 1945 does population surpass previous peak of 1060 in 1820. Foreign born population 199 in 1930.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Settlement remains linear and agricultural with a small node developed at the southern end of Assonet Neck by 1937.

D. Economic Base:

Relatively little identified change. Poultry farming was carried on by several farms.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Comparatively few houses were built in the period; a few hip-roofed story-and-a-half Craftsman cottages were built along North Main Street but no significant residential construction occurred.

Commercial: An airfield was constructed on Church Street near Myricks during the period; the two structures associated with it, a one-story shed and a one-story, arched-roof hangar are both still standing. A gas station was built at the town center along with a few one-story utilitarian storefronts.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

Berkley's inventory is based on windshield survey completed by the M.H.C. in the early 1970s; it, therefore, has no historical data. Further survey should complete information on existing inventory forms. While surveying was completed in the western half of town, no survey appears to have been done in the eastern half of town; that section should be inventoried, especially the Myricks section, an early to mid 19th century village.

Industrial: The only observed omission from the Berkley survey was the Berkley-Dighton Bridge, possibly the state's oldest swing span, and in a rural setting that has changed very little since the bridge's construction in 1896.

XII. SOURCES

Nichols, Walter D., "Berkley," in D.H. Hurd's History of Bristol County, Massachusetts (Phila., 1883), pp.174-191.

Sanford, Enoch, History of the Town of Berkley, Mass. (New York, 1872).

Watkins, Lura Woodside, Early New England Potters and Their Wares (Cambridge, 1950).