

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

BURLINGTON

Report Date: 1980

Associated Regional Report: Boston Area

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: November, 1980

Community: Burlington

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Town occupies 11.84 square miles on three watersheds -- that of the Ipswich, Mystic, and Shawsheen Rivers. The valley of the Shawsheen lies immediately to the west of the town, while the swamp and marshland through which the Ipswich flows in Wilmington lies immediately to the northeast. Between these two river systems lies a swampy upland area dotted with hills, some well over 200 feet in height. Vine Brook, a Shawsheen tributary originating in Lexington and which provided most of the town's waterpower, lies in a valley to the southwest, now largely dominated by the Burlington Mall and the industrial/commercial development along Middlesex Street. The southeast corner of the town drains into a branch of Woburn's Fowle Brook, a Mystic River tributary.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Originally part of Woburn grant with 1636 Eight Mile Line surviving as Lexington boundary. Became Woburn Second Parish 1730 with mid-18th century boundaries at Wilmington, Bedford, and Billerica Lines. Formed as independent town of Burlington 1799 with division at Woburn line.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Suburban industrial town at junction of Boston-Merrimac corridor. Located on uplands along Vine-Brook-Shawshine valley with native site reported on Sandy Brook and site potential around Great Meadow. Early corridor of settlement between Woburn and Billerica with authentic First Period house near primary Cambridge St. axis. Modest agricultural development during Colonial period with several mid-18th century houses, including early Georgian plans and original meeting house in heavily altered form around town common. Important corridor during early 19th century between Boston and Merrimac with development along Cambridge and Middlesex Sts., including surviving Federal Period taverns near town center. Bypassed from railroad links to Boston and Lowell with limited industrial development in shoe crafts and market agriculture through late 19th century. Town center remains as civic focus with modest examples of suburban Victorian styles. Auto highway development on Cambridge-Winn St. corridor creates commercial strip around town center by mid-20th century with some examples of period Craftsman and Historic houses, and notable Early Modern high school. Present development of Burlington Mall along Route 128 axis has totally overwhelmed Vine Brook Valley and threatens integrity of Great Meadow. Similar commercial growth has extended along Cambridge St. corridor, although town common retains some of historic core within intense residential suburban fabric.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Interregional connections between Shawshine, Ipswich, and Mystic Basins. Primary N/S route presumed as Cambridge St. across Sandy Brook with loops at Chestnut-County Roads. Alternate trail around Sandy-Vine Brooks appears as Lexington Street with northern branch as Great Meadow Rd. However, most segments obliterated around Burlington Mall-Rte. 128 junction. Cross routes E/W are uncertain, with possible candidates as Bedford-Francis Wyman Streets and portions of Peach Orchard, Locust and Mill Sts. to Ipswich basin. Documented trail link to Mystic appears as Mountain-Wyman Sts. with N/S axis presumed along Winn St.

B. Settlement Pattern:

No known period sites. Sites possible along Vine Brook, especially in the Great Meadows area (including well drained, south facing areas along Sandy and Long Meadow Brooks).

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Good agricultural potential in Great Meadow area, otherwise upland hunting and gathering.

D. Observations:

Located in upland watershed between Merrimack/Shawsheen, Ipswich, and Mystic river drainages. As such, area was more likely an inter-tribal buffer zone than territory of any particular group.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails improved as regional highways between Woburn and Billerica with primary N/S route as Cambridge and Lexington Sts. Local connections of mid-17th century included Mountain-Wyman and Bedford-Francis Wyman Sts.

B. Population:

Probably very limited population by 1675, perhaps not more than 10-12 families.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Outlying district between Billerica and Woburn with documented farmsteads along Cambridge Rd. axis by 1660s and on periphery of native frontier with pre-King Philip's War incident on Bedford Street.

D. Economic Base:

Subsistence farming.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Meeting house location at Burlington Center creates radial pattern during mid-18th century with Center, Bedford, Terrace Hall, Stony Brook, Mill, and Wilmington Streets.

B. Population:

Sufficient population by 1730 to merit establishment of second Parish (now Burlington) in Woburn. Twenty-one pew lots incorporated into meeting house constructed 1735. By end of period, population had probably reached 450-500.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Continued expansion of agricultural economy with primary focus along Cambridge St. through mid-18th century. Formation of town center with meeting house 1732 at highway junction of regional roads at Burlington common and several mill sites along Sandy and Vine Brooks.

D. Economic Base:

Products of town wholly agricultural though one of two mills probably established in this period along Vine Brook. Probably some shoemaking by end of period.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Perhaps a dozen early houses survive in Burlington; of these, most are center chimney vernacular examples with little ornamental detail, save for simple Georgian entries. At least one house is given a First Period date, but it seems unlikely that any houses were built before ca.1730. With only one gambrel roofed example known and no hip roofed houses known or recorded, it seems probable that very little, if any, highstyle construction occurred.

Institutional: Although it has had several additions and alterations over time, it appears that the Burlington meetinghouse, built in 1732 still stands. As originally constructed, the building was shorter than at present and seems to have been a simply detailed structure, possibly without a belfry or cupola (the present belfry being a 19th century replacement).

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Improvement of N/S routes between Boston and Merrimac during early 19th century with Middlesex Turnpike 1806 and realignment of Cambridge Street through town center.

B. Population:

Virtually no growth in the town in this period. Fluctuating population with figure rising and falling in successive decades, averaging about 480 throughout period. 1800 figure of 534 not subsequently attained until 1850.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Town center remained as civic focus with highway taverns along Cambridge St. axis and Middlesex Turnpike along Vine Brook.

D. Economic Base:

Almost entirely agricultural town with some produce sent to Boston. Hops and rye among principal products. Sawmill on Clear Meadow Brook and both saw and grist mills on Vine Brook during this period. Small shoemaking shops by end of period employed full or part time 21 men and 18 women.

E. Architecture:

Residential: The few Federal style houses constructed are paired and rear wall chimney vernacular examples; only one end chimney Federal house is recorded.

Institutional: The West School, a one room Federal schoolhouse, is the only surviving institutional structure, though it seems likely that other school buildings were constructed.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Turnpikes and highways remain from early 19th century. Bypassed by early Boston-Merrimac railroads with no local routes.

B. Population:

Fluctuating population, showing little growth. Between 1830 and 1870, town grew by 180 people, reaching 626 by latter date. Of these, about 11% were foreign born, mostly of Irish birth.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Lack of access to Boston railroads limits development to market agriculture through mid-19th century with town common remaining as local civic center.

D. Economic Base:

Agricultural production still accounted for most of the products of the town. In 1865, there were 105 farms with \$330,801 worth of produce annually. About 1840, Isaiah Reed began buying hogs and selling pork and sausages, the beginning of his son T.I. Reed's extensive "Ham Works." Thomas Barr & Co. operated a print works on the Reed Mill privilege printing woolens.

E. Architecture:

Residential: No highstyle Greek Revival houses are recorded and few appear to have been built. Most of the Greek Revival houses constructed are sidehall plan structures with elements of the Italianate. These are found in scattered locations along Winn, Center, Cambridge, and Francis Wyman Streets. Similarly, there are very few Italianate houses, most of these being modest center entrance farmhouses

Institutional: The best preserved institutional building surviving in Burlington is the Burlington Historical Society building, built in 1857 as a school. A simply massed Italianate building, it retains all of its original detailing including an elaborate weathervane; no other buildings are known to survive.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Local road system remains intact from mid-19th century with focus upon town center. Extension of streetcar route between Woburn and Billerica along Winn-Cambridge Streets around town center.

B. Population:

Population in this period peaked in 1880 at 711 and thereafter declined, by 1905 reaching a low point of 588. Only in the period's last decade was there any advance, and beginning in 1910 the town became part of the growing movement toward residential subdivisions. By the end of the period, Irish immigration accounted for about 9% of the total population.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Limited development along Cambridge St. axis with trolley route bypass around town center preserving meeting house common.

D. Economic Base:

The most extensive business, Hurd wrote in 1890, was the ham business owned by Thomas I. Reed, who cured the celebrated "Reed Hams" for sale in Boston. Two steam-powered shoe stock manufacturers were located at the center of town and one in Havenville. There was also one saw and one grist mill. Most of the town's economic base remained in strictly agricultural production, however, and quantities of Burlington milk, fruit, and vegetables were marketed in Boston and elsewhere.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Very little construction took place with little or no highstyle buildings and only a very few suburban Queen Anne houses built. These are located around the junction of Cambridge Street and Lexington Road.

Institutional: A modest Queen Anne style high school was constructed (ca.1890).

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Abandonment of trolley lines and improvement of local roads as auto highways with N/S Route 3-3A (Cambridge St.) and E/W Route 62 (Bedford-Wilmington Sts.) through town center during 1930s.

B. Population:

Between 1920 and 1935 population grew steadily by about 80 people a year. By 1940, though, the town's 11.8 square miles were still sparsely populated, its 1915 figure had been nearly tripled. But the town's real growth was tied to the construction of Route 128 in the 1950s, and, particularly between 1955 and 1965, Burlington was the fastest growing town in the state. In the five years 1955-60, the population more than tripled as the town grew by over 1520 people a year. In 1975, the population stood at 24,306 -- about 12 times what it had been 35 years before.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Development remained of modest scale with commercial strip along Cambridge St. axis at Sandy Brook and residential tract at Wynnmere along Winn St. transit route.

D. Economic Base:

Milk, fruit, and vegetables remained the principle products of the town in this period.

E. Architecture:

Residential: With the exception of a few well-detailed cobbled basement bungalows, the majority of the houses constructed were very modest Craftsman-related cottages, some of which were probably built by their original owners. A very few Colonial Revival cape houses may date from the late 1930s.

Institutional: The Burlington High School is an early and unusual example of the use of the International Style' in an institutional context; built in 1938, it is a utilitarian brick structure with a simply detailed offset entrance with massive concrete columns and a two story glass block stair window. The building is primarily significant as the apparent progenitor for later school architecture in Burlington, where several more International Style and Bauhaus-related schools were built in the 1950s and early '60s.

Commercial: A few of the commercial structures located along the Cambridge Street strip may date from the 1920s and '30s; these are all one story utilitarian frame structures.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

Although Burlington had virtually no industry, its principal claim to industrial fame in the late 19th century were "Reed Hams" produced by the Reed Ham Works on Cambridge Street. The wood-frame complex now occupied by an electric supply company and other tenants, remains essentially intact at the corner of Chestnut Avenue.

XII. SOURCES

Fogelberg, John, Burlington -- Part of a Greater Chronicle (Burlington, 1976).

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