

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

BOXBOROUGH

Report Date: 1980

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

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

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

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

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MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

DATE: March, 1980

COMMUNITY: Boxborough

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Located on rugged, hilly terrain. Areas of exposed bedrock, reshaped by glacial scouring; glacial outwash features prominent in landscape. A thin, rocky soil. An upland watershed area: Beaver Brook draining N/NE into Merrimack; Elizabeth, Heath Hen Meadow and Guggins Brooks flowing S/SE into Assabet. Sizable areas of bog/swamp between elevations.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Incorporated as district of Boxborough, 1783, from parts of Stow, Littleton (part of former Praying Town lands), and Harvard. Became Town of Boxborough, 1835.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Small upland town within limits of Boston development. Located at boundary of central highlands with limited potential of native sites except along axis of western trails around wetlands. Restricted settlement as frontier area until mid-18th century with several Colonial period houses in authentic agricultural landscapes. Hill top town center by late 18th century retains well-preserved Federal period houses, including some brick examples. While traversed by regional turnpikes and railroads during early 19th century, restricted water power and limited farm sites discourage growth through mid-20th century. Recent highway links to Boston have spurred some residential development, although much of town retains historic period character, especially Boxborough center area.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Located in central highlands at headwaters of Merrimack River. Conjectured trails follow western corridor to interior as S. Acton-Burroughs Roads around Wolf Swamp with suspected loop near Old South Cemetery. Secondary branches suspected around Heath Swamp as Middle Street and portions of the trail to Fort Pond (Littleton) to Boxborough Station. A likely trail is conjectured along the Beaver Brook esker near Muddy Pond.

B. Settlement Pattern:

No known sites. Sites possible, on well drained terraces and knolls adjacent to major brooks, especially along the Beaver Brook esker.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Upland hunting and gathering. Some limited potential for agriculture.

D. Observations:

Not an area likely to have much period occupation in part due to lack of ponds.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails remain as local roads to interior during 17th century.

B. Population:

Apparently none.

C. Settlement:

Apparently none.

D. Economic Base:

May have been used as resource area by Praying Town Indians--area south of Boxborough Station referred to as "Indian Meadows."

E. Observations:

Unsettled frontier area.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1676-1776)

A. Transportation Routes:

Local roads improved as regional highways, with main western routes as Burroughs Road across southern section and Littlefield Road across northern portion. Formation of town center by late 18th century creates radial highway pattern from meetinghouse at Boxborough Center as Hill, Sherry, Middle and Stow Roads, with secondary system to mill site at Guggins Brook as Liberty Square and Flag Hill Roads. Old Harvard Road of early 18th century origin around Wolf Swamp.

B. Population:

Small colonial population probable at beginning of 18th century, gradual growth throughout rest of period. No specific figures available. Most people from Stow and Acton.

C. Settlement:

Scattered farms throughout town by mid-century especially along Liberty Square and Burroughs Roads. No real focal point of development.

D. Economic Base:

Agriculture and grazing--vegetables, fruit, and dairy products to Boston. An unspecified 18th century mill on Guggins Brook.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Relatively little construction during period; little or no high-style likely. Central-chimney two-story houses formed predominant house type (based on extant examples) although at least one central-chimney and one twin-chimney Cape Cod cottages may also have been built.

F. Observations:

Basically outlying agricultural sections of Stow and Littleton during period.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highways remain from 18th century with Union Turnpike (Route 111) extended from Concord along western axis (1806) through central town.

B. Population:

Slight decline in population from 1790 to 1810, followed by gradual increase to highest 19th century population level in 1830; Boxborough Religious Society founded in 1775 when town was still a district, society divided in 1829 into a Universalist Society and an Evangelical Congregational Society; Methodists present in town c. 1800, society formed 1811 with many members from Harvard, Massachusetts. No recorded foreign-born population present during period.

C. Settlement Location:

Small village center at junction of Middle ^{Road} ~~Street~~ and Hill Road; scattered farmhouses built along Hill Road.

D. Economic Base:

Agricultural economy. Small cottage industry presumably began toward end of period in boot and shoe making. Limestone, charcoal, and firewood produced for local consumption.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Central-chimney, two-story house plan probably continued to be built until c. 1810-20; stylistic details limited to several late Georgian doorways. Small number of Federalist style houses divided between rear-wall chimney houses and cottages; ambitious examples built of brick with end-wall chimneys, relatively simple decorative details; Federalist style houses and cottages probably continued to be built into the mid-1830s.

Institutional:

First meetinghouse constructed of materials from former Harvard, Massachusetts meetinghouse in 1775-6; at least one school house in existence prior to 1791, 4 school districts established in 1791 and 3 new school houses built, at least one school house replaced in 1807-08. Methodist Chapel built near Boxborough-Harvard town line, 1811 (burned after 1843).

Commercial:

Several one-story stores and workshops built at town center (Hill and ^{Street} ~~Middle Streets~~); several may have been incorporated within houses and not in separate structures.

Industrial:

Several grist and saw mills.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Turnpike and roads remain as highways from early 19th century. Fitchburg railroad (1845) through northeast corner with depot at Boxborough Station.

B. Population:

Fluctuation in 395-454 range until 1865 after which the town's population dropped from 454 to 338; small foreign-born population present, consisting of Irish and Canadian immigrants; no new religious societies formed.

C. Settlement Location:

Small village formed at junction of Middle ^{Road} ~~Street~~ and the Old Turnpike c. 1830-1840; scattered new construction along Littlefield Road and Hill Road.

D. Economic Base:

Dairy and fruit products spurred by introduction of Fitchburg railroad. Small (2 male employees) production of railroad carriages, noted in 1845 and 1855. Some local boot and shoe making (\$4,000 value, 1855).

E. Architecture

Residential:

No high-style present; almost all houses of period were side-hall plan examples of Greek Revival and Italianate styles, both houses and cottages.

Institutional:

^{Road} New town hall/meetinghouse built at old center, 1835; simple Greek Revival style meetinghouse built at Middle ~~Street~~ and Old Turnpike, c. 1832-36; schoolhouses rebuilt 1842, 1852-1857, 1868 and 1870.

Commercial:

Continued presence of stores at old town center until c. 1845 after which former stores were converted to barns or moved.

Industrial:

Scattered one-story workshops used for coopering and shoe making.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Rail and road systems intact from mid-19th century. No trolley routes through area.

B. Population:

Stable population in 307-384 range throughout period; small immigrant population made up primarily of Irish and Nova Scotian immigrants.

C. Settlement Location:

No change in settled area.

D. Economic Base:

No significant change. Most farmers engaged in production of milk for Boston market. Numerous orchards. Apples, pears, peaches, grapes, berries extensively cultivated for same market.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Nearly no new construction during period, some side-hall houses and cottages of late Italianate and Victorian Gothic styles.

Institutional:

Queen Anne style town hall built 1901; continued use of 4 one-room school houses.

Commercial:

No apparent development.

Industrial:

No apparent development, decline of shoe-making and coopering.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

System remains in place from early 20th century with autohighways improved along Turnpike Street as Route 111.

B. Population:

Stable population until 1930-35 when a large increase occurred (from 312 to 404), followed by slight decline.

C. Settlement Location:

No change in settled area.

D. Economic Base:

Small fruits and dairy products continue to be grown for Boston and area markets.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Nearly no new construction evident, examples of period likely to have been restricted to cottage-size bungalows and Colonial Revival style houses.

Institutional:

No new construction evident.

Commercial:

No new construction evident except for automobile garage (c. 1920).

Industrial:

No new construction.

XI. SOURCES

Hager, Lucie Caroline Gilson, "Boxborough," in Duane H. Hurd's History of Middlesex County, Massachusetts (3 vols., Phila., 1890), v.3, pp. 768-793.

-----, Boxborough: A New England Town and its People (Phila., 1891).