

# MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

## CHELMSFORD

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.

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: April, 1980

COMMUNITY: Chelmsford

### I. TOPOGRAPHY

Located on rolling riverine plain and adjacent hilly uplands. Southern and western sections more rugged with considerable exposed bedrock, plus glacial outwash features. Variable soil--thin and rocky upland, deep alluvial sand/gravel in lowlands. Basic NE/SW grain of underlying bedrock evident in watershed boundaries. To north, Stony Brook and ponds flow into Merrimack; to south, Beaver and Great (River Meadow) Brooks and ponds drain into Concord River.

### II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Praying Town established at Pawtucket and Wamiset, 1653. Plantation of Chelmsford established, 1655. Size increased by Three Mile grant, 1656. Between 1660 and 1726, Praying Town lands gradually absorbed. Considerable boundary adjustment with formation of new 18th century towns: Littleton (1725), Westford (1730), Dunstable (1755) and Carlisle (1780). Additional territory lost with establishment of Lowell (1826).

### III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Suburban industrial town on axis of Lowell-New Hampshire development. Located along Merrimack valley with important tributary streams. Native sites reported around Heart Pond and Robbins Hill with suspected locations along major brooks and Merrimack flood plain. On periphery of Wamiset Praying Town with early English town center formation by mid-17th century as extended street-village. Several surviving houses with traditional First Period dates, notably around Pine Hill, and well-preserved burying ground with wide range of carving styles. Early mill sites along Stony Brook with reported iron forge by 18th century in North Chelmsford, later expanded as textile mill center during 19th century with surviving period housing and industrial buildings of Lowell type. Remaining portions of town gradually absorbed into expansion of Lowell with Federal period structures of taverns, turnpikes and canals along Merrimack-Boston corridor to Concord River. Town center contains well-preserved array of historic period buildings in authentic village setting, including high-style residential examples with a similar period village preserved in South Chelmsford. At present much of the town has undergone intensive suburbanization and continued pressure exists along the main highways to New Hampshire and Boston, while the town center suffers from neglect of historic period structures.

### IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

#### A. Transportation Routes:

Located on peripheral uplands along Concord and Merrimack Rivers. Main trail routes follow north/south grain to Merrimack with connecting east/west links. Conjectured routes follow Concord-Boston-North Streets (Route 4) around River Meadow Brook and Drum Hill, Steadman-Billerica Roads to Black Brook (Middlesex Village) and Concord ford (North Billerica) with branch to

Robbins Hill as Mill-Parker Byam Roads. Local network of trails around Heart Pond likely as Garrison-Elm. Hunt-Pine Hill and Robin Hill-High Street to Beaver Brook (town center). Alternate branch around Pine and Chestnut Hills likely as Old Westford Street. Route locations along Merrimack through North Chelmsford as Middlesex-Dunstable-Old Tyngsboro Roads, with branch along Stony Brook as Main-Swain Streets to West Chelmsford. Possible link to Concord as Carlisle Road (Billerica).

B. Settlement Pattern:

Probable period sites reported on Robbins Hill and on terrace between Black and River Meadow Brooks. Unspecified sites around Heart Pond and along Westford Street (NE of Route 3 intersection). Additional sites likely along both Merrimack and Concord Rivers, around major ponds and brooks.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Access to major anadromous fish runs in Merrimack and Concord as well as in major tributary streams and headwater ponds. Fresh water fishing in larger ponds. Good agricultural lands along rivers. Upland and lowland hunting/gathering. An area with a wide variety of resources.

D. Observations:

A major area of native settlement, due primarily to tremendous fish resources in Merrimack and Concord. Reputedly a core area for Pawtucket people (riverine-coastal oriented group). As little is known about these people, area sites are important in providing data. No European contact materials reported though presence is likely.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails used as highway locations with formation of town center during mid-17th century and improvements of radial routes from meeting house as Billerica, Steadman, North, Westford, Pine Hill, High, and Boston Roads.

B. Population:

Probably a sizable, though seasonal, native population. First colonial settlers shortly after 1650; about twenty families in 1655. 67 people on 1672 tax list.

C. Settlement:

Native settlement along falls at Pawtucket and at Merrimack/Concord confluence (Wamiset). Rather loosely clustered colonial settlement along Beaver Brook on Westford/Billerica Roads. Focused around meetinghouse, built 1659. Settlement extended south along Boston Road toward Adams's mill on Great Brook.

D. Economic Base:

Native "corn fields" still reported on Robbins Hill prior to 1660. Agriculture and grazing (cattle and sheep) primarily on a closed field system with

some common land reserved for livestock, i.e., Newfield (north of Stony Brook), 1667. Seasonal lumbering. Some fishing and fur trading. At least two period mills: Samuel Adams's saw/grist mill, 1656 on Great Brook (now Russell Millpond); Thomas Hinchman's saw mill, 1669 on Stony Brook. An unspecified tavern (Spaulding's?) by 1672.

E. Observations:

A fairly small frontier community. Adjacent Praying Town perceived as inhibiting community's development since it occupied the most desirable land.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highways remain from 17th century with post roads along Merrimack and through Chelmsford Center (Routes 3A and 4).

B. Population:

Slow growth during 17th century due to frontier warfare. A major emigration to Connecticut lowers population in 1690. Stabilized after 1714 with rapid growth during subsequent decades (especially after annexation of Praying Town lands). In 1741, 853 people; Census of 1765, 133 houses, 176 families and 1012 inhabitants. Census of 1776 listed 1,341 people.

C. Settlement:

Native Praying Town inhabitants deported during King Philip's War; a few returned afterward. Colonial town center remained focus of growth--meeting-house repaired 1701, second meetinghouse built 1710, first school built 1713. Town center extended north along North Road, east along Billerica Road and into "West End," Westford Street. Secondary loci of development: South Chelmsford--garrison house from 1690, pre-Revolutionary cemetery and farms around Heart Pond; Stony Brook valley--settlement around mills, 1682-1700. Many scattered farms on riverine lowlands especially as Praying Town lands became available.

D. Economic Base:

Agriculture and grazing, with dairying and orchards as specialties. Lumbering. Increasingly diversified during 18th century. Mills: John Parker's saw mill, 1678 on Beaver Brook; Daniel Waldo's grist mill, 1695 on Deep Brook. John Lowell, tannery, 1682. John Richardson, iron works, 1706 Stony Brook. Lime quarry and kiln, 1736 of Beaver Brook. Brickyard, probably 18th century, Brick Kiln Road. Apparently several taverns, but no specific information.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Houses of the period seem to have been nearly equally divided (in total numbers) between two-story central-chimney and two-story twin-chimney plans,

although it is likely that the twin-chimney plans were built more toward the end of the period. No central-chimney cottages seem to have been recorded from this period. Little high-style is likely to have been built, although it is possible that one- or two-hip roofed late Georgian houses with classical details (resembling houses in Concord and Bedford) were built at the end of the Colonial Period or early in the Federal Period. While at least one brick-end house has an attributed construction date of 1756, it seems unlikely that brick construction in Chelmsford pre-dates the Federal Period. A local tradition exists (Waters, History of Chelmsford) that early Colonial Period houses in Chelmsford were large 1-1/2 story gambrel cottages; however, only one example (demolished) has been recorded.

F. Observations:

A struggling town during late 17th century, preoccupied with gaining control over Praying Town lands. 18th century characterized by stable growth, despite territory loss due to new town formation

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Colonial highways remain in place with improvement of Merrimack-Boston axis as Middlesex Canal (1801) along River Meadow Brook--portions of canal bed survive in meadow--and Middlesex Turnpike (1806)--portions remain as Turnpike and North Roads to North Chelmsford--with local radials to Dunstable and Graniteville (Westford). Improvement of water power on Stony Brook with power canal (1824-25) to Newfield Pond.

B. Population

Slight decline after Revolution was followed by gradual increases throughout period until 1820-1830, when the separation of East Chelmsford (now Lowell) led to a brief decline in the reported population of Chelmsford. No known foreign-born population. North Congregational Society formed 1820s (?); elsewhere, First Congregational Society and existing Baptist Society (1771-South Chelmsford) remained active.

C. Settlement Location:

Small villages developed around mills at North Chelmsford and at West Chelmsford (Scythe Factory Village--after 1823); village enlarged at Chelmsford Center by new construction along major roads leading to the center; some limited development of South Chelmsford primarily as an agricultural village.

D. Economic Base:

By 1790, three saw and/or grist mills. Earliest manufacturing in West Chelmsford, c. 1790 with fulling and carding mills. Sword manufacture by Ames Company, said to be first concern in U.S. to turn out these products (Stone, p. 982), moved to Chicopee 1829. Scythe factory built at West Chelmsford (Scythe Factory Village), 1823. Tapping of Stony Brook at West Chelmsford by power canal to North Chelmsford 1824-25 moved industrial locus to

latter village. Chelmsford Foundry, begun 1825 with Easton iron experience, produced cashings and parts for mills at Lowell and elsewhere. Predecessor of Silver & Gay Machine Shop, manufacturers of textile machinery, began soon after and shared the market. Period also witnessed opening of granite quarries (Fletcher's supplied Boston's Quincy Market, and is still in operation), and after supplying lime for Lowell construction, the closing of limestone quarries, driven out by cheap availability of the product from Maine. A mine of copperas (used in the tanning of leather) was worked on Robbins Hill.

#### E. Architecture

##### Residential:

Range of examples present included late Georgian high-style (c. 1770-1805), high-style Federalist (c. 1790-1825) and vernacular examples of both styles. Brick construction seems to have been popular during the period and appeared most frequently as brick-end walls for ambitious houses. Major high-style houses were located mostly at Chelmsford Center and in the vicinity of South Chelmsford. Less elaborate houses were built with a variety of plans, of which the most widespread was the two-story rear-wall chimney type, followed by twin-chimney house plans and by a small number of central-chimney and rear-wall chimney cottages. The construction of workers' housing at North Chelmsford probably straddled the period's end and included brick row-houses, wood-frame row houses, central-chimney cottages and a small number of double houses, all of simple late Federal/Greek Revival design.

##### Institutional:

Federalist style meetinghouse built at Chelmsford Center (1792); meetinghouse built at North Chelmsford (?-1820s); tradition reports 'noon houses' during period. School districts established 1792, 12 school houses constructed between 1794 and 1800 (two or three of which were within the modern boundaries of Lowell); one-story brick school houses built as early as 1802 (Chelmsford Center); 2-story school house with bell tower built at North Chelmsford (c. 1820?). Chelmsford Classical School founded 1825 and two-story school house built. Town farm established 1823.

##### Commercial:

Taverns and commerce related to stage routes recorded for much of period, until stage travel declined following the opening of railroad lines (late 1830s).

##### Industrial:

Probable small-scale wooden construction until end of period when brick and stone construction may have been used at North Chelmsford.

### VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

#### A. Transportation Routes:

Canals, turnpikes and highways remain from early 19th century. Location of early railroad routes to Lowell along Merrimack through North Chelmsford

(1838) with branch to Ayer along Stony Brook (1848). Secondary route through Chelmsford center as Framingham and Lowell (1871) now not used. Abandonment of Middlesex Canal (1851) with railroad competition.

B. Population:

Especially rapid growth between 1830 and 1850, followed by slower growth and stabilization of population during the Civil War. Foreign-born population made up largely of Irish immigrants after c. 1840. New religious societies included a Trinitarian Society at North Chelmsford (formerly North Congregational Society?), Universalist Society (1842-44), the Central Baptist Society (1847), West Chelmsford Union Church (1848), St. John's Catholic Parish (1860) and All Saints' Episcopal Parish (1867).

C. Settlement Location:

Essentially the same areas and trends as in the preceding period; however, a larger portion of growth was focused on North Chelmsford which became the town's largest village; Chelmsford Center gradually became a residential district, with little industry.

D. Economic Base:

North Chelmsford remained dominant industrial center of town. Silver & Gay established 1832, one of the first machine shops in U.S. to manufacture worsted yarn machinery, and inventor of the automatic ball winder (balls of twine). Baldwin Worsted Yarn Mill, 1841. 1867 Swain Iron Foundry built for manufacture of Swain's own (and popular) water turbine. Lucifer Match invented and manufactured 1835 by Ezekial Byam, South Chelmsford. Worsted Yarn Mill, West Chelmsford, c. 1830, rebuilt as the Eagle Mills, 1867; Scythe factory turned to sword manufacture during Civil War.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Architecture of the period was dominated by side-hall plan houses and cottages of late Greek Revival and Italianate design, especially at North Chelmsford, at the southern edge of West Chelmsford (School Street) and in scattered farm locations. Relatively few examples existed of high-style architecture; the most ambitious houses present included several central entrance Italianate houses at the outskirts of Chelmsford Center, one simple Gothic cottage at Chelmsford Center and several Greek Revival style cottages with some Gothic trim (North Chelmsford). High-style Greek Revival architecture was virtually non-existent as was Second Empire style architecture.

Institutional:

Meetinghouses with combined Gothic/Greek Revival style elements built at South Chelmsford (1836-Baptist) and at North Chelmsford (1836-Trinitarian); Greek Revival style meetinghouses built 1842 (Chelmsford Center) and 1848 (West Chelmsford); former Middlesex Village meetinghouse (1824) converted to Catholic Church at North Chelmsford (1860); Gothic Revival style church built at Chelmsford Center (1869-Baptist). School districts (approximately

ten) remained in use during most, if not all, of period; high school operated in former Classical School, 1859-62. Town government and First Parish separated 1830, after which town hall was located in the basement of the First Parish meetinghouse; 1852, a wood-frame two-story Town Hall (Italianate style) was built at North Chelmsford, after 1852 town meetings alternated between Chelmsford Center and North Chelmsford. Stone monument built in honor of Revolutionary War, 1859-60 (Chelmsford Center).

Commercial:

Little development likely except for several wood-frame one- and two-story buildings at Chelmsford Center and North Chelmsford. North, South and West Chelmsford and at Chelmsford Center, 1838-c. 1850.

Industrial:

Brick textile mills and mill complexes built on water privilege at North Chelmsford; design of mills was probably taken from the major complexes at Lowell. Italianate style stone mill constructed at West Chelmsford (1863). Few, if any, other major mill buildings likely; other industrial buildings of period likely to have been one- and two-story wood-frame shops.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Rail and road system remains from mid-19th century. Extension of Lowell streetcar routes by early 1900s to Chelmsford Center along Chelmsford Road (Route 110) and to North Chelmsford-Tyngsboro as Merrimack-Middlesex Roads (Route 3A).

B. Population:

Fluctuation in 2,372-2,695 range until 1890 after which rapid growth continued until 1910. Large increases occurred in the foreign-born population after 1885; Irish immigrants remained the largest single group until 1905-15 when English immigrants became the largest foreign-born group. New religious societies included the Central Congregational Society (Chelmsford Center-1870), St. Alban's Episcopal Mission at North Chelmsford (1915) and the Plymouth Brethren Mission at North Chelmsford (1914).

C. Settlement Location:

New settlement occurred mainly on side streets at North Chelmsford, in suburban districts south and west of Chelmsford Center and in Lowell-related suburban districts in the eastern sections of Chelmsford.

D. Economic Base:

Of West Chelmsford industries, Eagle Mills burned 1883; scythe factory discontinued c. 1888. Machine shop for knitting machinery built at center village, 1887; by 1901 site of Chelmsford Ginger Ale (MHC #120). North



Chelmsford after 1872 became increasingly dominated by George C. Moore who began a wool-scouring business in that year. The Silesia Worsted Mills, established by Moore in the 1870s, sold in 1912 to the U.S. Worsted Company, was the largest establishment in Chelmsford. In 1898 Moore purchased Silver & Gay, then the North Chelmsford Machine Company. By 1915 Moore owned all the water rights on Stony Brook between Graniteville and the Merrimack River. Chelmsford Foundry Company discontinued 1813.

#### E. Architecture

##### Residential:

Mid-Victorian styles such as Victorian Gothic and Second Empire were rare, while later Victorian styles (Queen Anne and Colonial Revival) as well as eclectic early 20th century styles (bungalow) were widespread. High-style, suburban houses were built in small numbers along Middlesex Street at North Chelmsford, south of Chelmsford Center (Acton, High and Bartlett Streets and Boston Road) while more modest side-hall plan houses and cottages were built at North Chelmsford (Sherman, Newheld and other side streets in the vicinity of Groton Road and Middlesex Street), at Chelmsford Center (along Billerica, North and Littleton Roads) at East Chelmsford along side streets running off of Steadman Street and Chelmsford Road (Westlands) and at West Chelmsford (School Street-pre-1890). Little or not workers' housing was built during this period.

##### Institutional:

Gothic Revival style church built of stone, 1882 (Episcopal); Queen Anne style wood-frame churches built 1888 (West Chelmsford--Methodist), c. 1890 (Chelmsford Center-Congregational), and 1893 (North Chelmsford--Congregational). Date of graded schools and closing of one-room school houses not recorded in secondary sources; however, two Classical Revival style brick school buildings at Chelmsford Center (High School-1916; Junior High School-c. 1910) suggest that centralized, graded schools were adopted in the early 20th century. Other town-owned properties included an Italianate style town hall at Chelmsford Center (1879), a new town farm (1871), and a Classical Revival style public library building (1894). At South Chelmsford a small Italianate style public hall (Liberty Hall) was built c. 1870. In 1894 a country-owned truant school (County Training School) was established at North Chelmsford (Princeton Street) and six Colonial Revival style brick buildings were constructed between 1894 and 1917.

##### Commercial:

Essentially same scale and type of commercial development as in preceding period; some one-story brick store fronts built. Several two and three story wood-frame blocks (Second Empire and Queen Anne styles) were built at Chelmsford Center during the 1880s and 1890s.

##### Industrial:

Enlargement and rebuilding of existing textile complex at North Chelmsford, two-story brick knitting mill built at Chelmsford Center, 1887; brick and concrete factory built near Merrimack River (off Tyngsboro Road) at North Chelmsford, c. 1910.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Abandonment of trolley routes in 1920s and improvement of local roads as regional autoroutes including North-Boston Roads as Route 4, and Chelmsford-Acton Roads as Route 27 through town center with Merrimack-Middlesex Roads as Route 3 (now 3A) and North Road as Route 40 to North Chelmsford. Portion of original express Route 3 with parkway bridges (1940) survives around Drum Hill.

B. Population:

Rapid population growth throughout period; secondary sources do not record immigration statistics or new religious societies for period.

C. Settlement Location:

New settlement was primarily suburban and concentrated in the eastern portions of Chelmsford, near Lowell.

D. Economic Base:

Wool combing plant, North Chelmsford, 1922. No other observed industrial development.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Little high-style present, except (perhaps) south of Chelmsford Center. Most new houses were modest two-story houses or cottages, of both bungalow and Colonial Revival styles. Little or no multiple family housing seems to have been built.

Institutional:

No changes recorded in secondary sources, although new school buildings were probably built.

Commercial:

Little apparent expansion of commercial activity--Chelmsford Center and North Chelmsford remained minor commercial centers.

Industrial:

Little expansion; no apparent new complexes.

XI. SOURCES

Waters, Wilson, History of Chelmsford, 1917.

End, Arthur (ed.), Cotton Was King, A History of Lowell, 1976.