

# MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

## COHASSET

Report Date: 1979

**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: December 1979

COMMUNITY: Cohasset

### I. TOPOGRAPHY

Located on rocky coastal lowlands and adjacent uplands. A rough and irregular coastline with several small harbors. Soil is sandy and generally fillable in low-lands areas. Many evidences of glacial scouring; frequent glacial outwash features. Drainage N.WE and E via small streams and brooks into Atlantic ocean. Two large fresh water ponds inland. SW section of town very rocky and rugged, large areas of inland bog and swamp.

### II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Original boundaries include Old Colony line (1640) on south. Part of Hingham, 1635. Formal land division began, 1648; concluded with surveyed establishment of three Divisions, 1670. Because second precinct of Hingham, 1711. Incorporated as Town of Cohasset, 1771.

### III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Coastal suburban resort within Boston metropolitan range. Located at outerfringe of regional routeways, but with well documented sites from Woodland period along shore and interior valleys. Settlement extended from Hingham in late 17th century with fine example of field division grid of period. Economic development in 18th century along coastal shore with well-preserved town center, common, meeting house and numerous Colonial houses with modest period features. Limited industrial opportunity in 19th century with fishing and salvage from landlocked harbor. Substantial development of residential resort along seacoast by 20th century with several houses of high architectural quality form Victorian to Modern style. Linked by rail and autohighway to Boston, but little commercial development.

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

#### A. Transportation Routes:

Trail system was part of coastal network from Massachusetts Bay to North River and Plymouth. Documented trails (Bigelow, 1898) include shore path from Tugmanug (Hingham) alone Straits Pond to Little Harbor Cohasset approximately Jerusalem Rd with south leg along shore marsh to Bound Brook along axis of S. Main St, although original location followed natural contours. A second path from Hingham to Bound Brook followed an interior route which has been conjectured along Cedar St around Great Swamp and Scituate Hill to Scituate (Lilly) Pond and Turtle Island, although precise location remains undocumented. It is also logical that a branch from Cedar St. followed James Brook valley to Cohasset Harbor along the present course of N. Main St.

#### B. Settlement Pattern:

No documented sited reported for period. Town History, however, lists many site areas including possible Late Woodland components: shore of Straits Pond, Cooper's Island (Little Harbor, Westside), and entrance to Little Harbor (northside). Probable period occupation on Government Island as well. Probable period winter refuge sites in vicinity of Lily Pond and Beechwood (Bigelow, 1898, pp. 69-92).

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Area had resources to support native population. Good farm land close to coast, excellent clamming esp. at Straits Pond and Little Harbor, good fishing potential. While coastline is not as accessible as elsewhere, still good potential for 16th and early 17th century. European-native contact & trade - Note: John Smith's visit to "Quonahassit" harbor, 1614.

D. Observations:

An area with high site potential. Note place names such as Brass Kettle Brook suggestive of contact period burials.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails along coast (Jerusalem Rd.) and interior from Bound Brook to Lilly Pond and Scituate Hill remained as routeways from Scituate to Hingham. Primary road from Cohasset west to Hingham along N. Main and Cedar St. to Hull St. and south to Scituate along S. Main St. was established by mid-17th century (Fischer map 1672). Several highways were laid out on fertile lands west of Cohasset Harbor in 1670 as part of First and Second Divisions along grid anchored at Lilly Pond as Sohier, Pond, Beechwood and Kind Sts. A secondary system looped around Cohasset Harbor and Gulf Island, approximately Beach St. and portion of Atlantic Ave., although precise location is unknown.

B. Population:

Apparently none, or very little.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Appears that no permanent settlement took place prior to 1670 (formal land division), possibly not until after King Philip's War. Contrary to this is Samuel Maverick's observation (about 1660) of Cohasset as small village "nearby ye seaside" - possibly occupied on a seasonal basis.

D. Economic Base:

Cohasset served as the pasture and hayland for Hingham. Some lumbering done in interior uplands (Turkey Hill area).

E. Architecture:

Some houses may have been built in the mid-17th century or soon after the 1670 division of land, however, none is believed to have survived. Local traditions suggests that houses built in Cohasset at this time were simple 1-story cottages (Bigelow).

F. Observations:

Controversy over division of this pastureland is an excellent example of how the East Hingham enclosed farm system brought by Hingham settlers was applied in New World.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1676-1776)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highways from mid-17th century remained intact with little improvement. Primary route continues as Cedar, N. Main, S. Main from Hingham to Scituate. Secondary roads include extension in 1720s to iron forge at Beechwood Street. Interior trail from Lilly Pond to Hingham reported abandoned by mid-18th century (Bigelow, 1898).

B. Population:

Influx from Hingham begins after 1680. Initial surge of growth during first decades of 18th century. By 1711, twenty houses in precinct; by 1737, about fifty. Between 1737 and 1753, population doubles.

C. Settlement:

Initial settlement in "Rocky Nook" (Hull St.) and along Jerusalem Rd. Other areas & early settlement were at mouth of Bound Brook (Mordecai Lincoln, 1690) and south shore of Little Harbor (Daniel Lincoln, 1685). Main focus of development along North Main St. between Little Harbor and the Gulf. First meeting house built, 1713. Beechwood area settled after 1726.

D. Economic Base:

At first agriculture and grazing, especially sheep. Dairys, orchards, and tanneries as secondary operations. Lumbering during winter. Saw and grist mills at Straits Pond outlet (tidal?) after 1679 (Cushing). Several saw and grist mills on Bound Brook after 1730 (Mordecai Lincoln). Farm products and firewood exported to Boston,. Ironworks built on Turtle Island, Bound Brook, 1703 (Mordecai Lincoln and associates) - a small but successful local and forge. Cooperage as an associated activity. Maritime occupations develop quickly. Ship building at "Ship Cove" (Cohasset Harbor) from 1708. After 1730, increased commercial fishing. Cooperage as an associated cottage industry for packing fish. By 1750, commerical voyages to West Indies.

E. Architecture:

Residential- Central chimney two -story houses form dominant type, none believed to pre-date 1700. Some central chimney Cape Cod cottages sizable numbers of 3/4 houses (one & two stories). Little decorative trim extant, although at least one rusticated facade (Ca 1722-MHC survey) remains at Common; at least one garrison house built (1683-85) with stone base and wooden 2nd story (demolished).  
Institutional- Meeting house built mid 18th extant with late 18th century alterations and tower; one-room school house built Ca 1734 (demolished).  
Commercial and Industrial: no known structures extant.

F. Observations:

Prior to 1700, a subsidiary of Hingham; after 1700, increasingly independent and marine-oriented. A small, but prosperous and self sufficient community.

VII FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes :

Colonial pattern remained intact with improvement of Scituate - Hingham road as North Main across Great Swamp and S. Main along coast in the early 19th century.

B. Population:

Steady increase in population throughout period; no foreign-born population known; Methodist Congregation formed at North Cohasset (1817); Second Congregational Church (1821).

C. Settlement:

Principal settlement strung out along Common, So. Main Street, Elm Street and Summer Street; minor settlement around Beechwood (named Pratt's Corner in 1857); relatively dense building along Hull Road much of which was owned by members of the Beal Family.

D. Economy:

Fishing probably became major commercial activity, followed by farming, shipping and small-scale manufactures (shoes, wooden-ware and salt in 1837). By 1800 a "large scale" corn mill "with complicated machinery" was located at the mouth of the Gulf River (Flint, 1821). 18th century windmill and evaporation technologies produced extensive saltworks along the coast, upon which the shipment of mackerel heavily depended (described in Bigelow, 415). Summer resort tourists began to arrive around Black Rock Beach and Jerusalem Road in mid-1820s (Bigelow p 527)

E. Architecture:

Residential: Continued construction of central chimney vernacular types (one and two story) until Ca. 1800 -1820; most ambitious decorative trim consisted of a limited numbers of pilastered entries with pediments, quoins, and projecting window frames with moulded caps. Following Ca 1800, Federalist style houses built with low hip roofs and (occasionally) brick end walls; simple decorative trim; two-three story Federalist style houses extant (one is an enlargement of 18th c. house - MHC Cohasset Survey). Cape Cod cottages of varying proportion built throughout period.

Institutional: two meeting houses built for new congregations (1821-1825); one room school houses built, all demolished or converted to other uses after 1890.

Commercial: no structure built solely for commercial purposes seems to exist, except for one small structure with a gabled facade (MHC Survey); buildings around Common and along Elm Street likely to have had partial commercial use.

Industrial: Few buildings built; Cordage Shop extant (Elm Street); possible surviving workshops in vicinity of Cohasset Harbor.

VIII EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highway pattern remained intact from early 19th century. Railroad from Boston-Hingham follows historic axis to Cohasset along Great Swamp and James Brook (1849), with later extension to Scituate along coastal route (1871), now completely abandoned roadbed.

B. Population:

Steady growth throughout period; small influx of Irish and Portuguese immigrants ca. 1845-1875; Beechwood Church established 1866; by 1872 at least 40 Boston families had summer houses in Cohasset, among these were Sear's Codmans, Appletons, and other Boston Brahmin families.

C. Settlement:

Continued building in already developed areas; Beechwood(Pratt's Corner) became a more distinct village; summer cottages and houses began to be built on Gin Street near Bryant Point, along Jerusalem Road between Nichols Road ad Atlantic Avenue, and along Jerusalem Road west of Forest Avenue.

D. Economy:

Fishing declined after 1850's until it ceased altogether after 1885; at its peak (1845-1855) fishing employed 400 men and 44 boats; manufacturing relatively unimportant; trades & occupations characterized by blacksmithing, relatively diverse local economy.

E. Architecture:

Residential: houses of period were relatively simple, side hall cottages and two-story houses with Greek Revival ad Italianate style trim.

Extant summer houses and cottages appear to be rare and were probably simple frame building with machine-cut decorative trim, except in the vicinity of Jerusalem Road where more elaborate, architect-designed stone villas may have existed prior to 1870.

Institutional: Some structure remain from building on Government Island by Federal Government (MHC Cohasset Survey) Town Hall (1857-extant) and one-room school houses (demolished or altered). A private academy building (ca 1830) reportedly remains; converted to a house.

Commercial: Limited development of wood-frame commercial buildings and conversion of houses junction of Main ad Elm Streets.

Industrial: Little building, although one wood -frame shoe shop (MHC Survey) remains, likely that other workshops remain around Cohasset Harbor; at least four hotels built along Jerusalem Road near Straits Pond by 1857, additional hotels near Kimballs Point ad Pleasant Beach by 1876 (none appears to remain).

## XI LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870 - 1915)

### A. Transportation Routes:

Road and railroad network remained from mid-19th century. Early use of macadam highway for N. Main St. across Great Swamp in 1890s for resort travel (Bigelow, 1898), with linking road to shore estates in 1880's as Forest Ave and Atlantic Ave around Little Harbor. No street railway routes directly to Cohasset, although Nantasket service extended along Hull St and Atlantic Ave around Straits Pond 1890's.

### B. Population:

Stable between 1870-1885; slight increase Ca 1885 -1900; stable 1900-1915; increase of foreign-born population, reaching a reported high of 1,173 in 1905 (possibly an error in reporting); largest number of immigrants were Irish, followed by Portugese until Ca 1905-1915 when Italians became the second largest group.

### C. Settlement:

Most important development of period was the construction of large summer houses on small, landscaped estates overlooking the ocean, major locations of this sort of development were Jerusalem Road, Atlantic Avenue, Nichols Avenue (after mid 1880s) and, to a lesser degree, waterfront parcels east of So. Main Street; according to Bigelow (Narrative History) Cohasset's popularity was due to its being the only rocky section of coast south of Boston (the rest being marsh and sand); scattered development of modest houses occurred on small grid west of Cushing Road

### D. Economy:

Diverse economy, some small increase in manufacturing employment.

### E. Architecture:

Residential: Large free-standing summer houses built throughout period in varying styles of which the largest number were Queen Anne, neo-tudor and Spanish Mission/Art & Crafts; it is likely that most of these were designed by Boston architects for Boston clients; however, few individual building references have been found; architects known to have designed summer houses here include H.H. Richardson (1880s), C. H. Alden (1898) and Parker & Rice (early 20th century?).

Institutional: Small number of architect designed public buildings built including a Queen Anne style schoolhouse (Osgood School-1890) and Colonial Revival style library (Pratt Memorial - 1902) both designed by Edward Nichols; Gothic style Episcopal Church built in 1899 for congregation made up largely of summer residents (Cram, Goodhue & Ferguson, arch'ts.)

Commercial: Restricted mainly to the re-building of store fronts and the construction of some two-story, wooden frame commercial blocks in existing town center; Queen Anne style train station extant (Ripley Road-altered).

Industrial: Small artisan workshop extant (Ripley Road), other workshops possibly along Elm Street and around Cohasset Harbor, no known mill complexes.

## X EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

### A. Transportation Routes:

Basic system remained from late 19th century, with abandonment of Nantasket trolley routes around Straits Pond-Hull St. Autohighway extended along historic interior route from Hingham to Scituate in 1930's as Judge Cushing Way (Route #A) around Great Swamp Scituate Hill and Lilly Pond to Bound Brook along axis of King St.

B. Population:

Steady until Ca 1930; fluxuated 1930-1945; steady increase after 1945, population doubled between 1950-1975.

C. Settlement:

Some subdivision of Jerusalem Road estates; former driveways and paths converted to side streets & development of land around Little Harbor by wealthy commuters to Boston; scattered subdivisions of modest houses in the vicinities of Pond, Cushing and Pleasant Streets; no apprent large-scale speculative subdivisions.

D. Economic:

Increasingly a commuter suburb of Boston and less of a summer resort.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Strong local interest in Colonial Revival design and restoration of Colonial houses (1920s), partly encouraged by Edward Nichols, a local architect. More substantial Colonial style houses built near waterfront; development elsewhere consisted of modest fire-standing houses of various styles.

Institutional: Mainly restricted to town-owned school buildings.

Commercial: Little new building in existing town center; some strip development (post-WW-II) along Route 3A.

Industrial: No major industrial building.

X SOURCES

Bigelow, E. Victor, A Narrative History of the Town of Cohasset, Mass. (1898).

Flint, Jacob, "History and Description of Cohasset in the County of Norfolk, Massachusetts" (1821). In Mass. Historical Society Collections 1830, Series 3, Vol. 2., pp. 84-109.

Pratt, B.J., Narrative History of Cohasset

Cohasset U.S.A. 200 Years (1970)