

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

DRACUT

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.



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: April 1980

Community: Dracut

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Located on rolling to hilly upland terrain. Areas away from Merrimack are rugged and rocky. Considerable evidence of glacial reworking. Soil generally thin and rocky. Several large ponds, areas of upland bog/swamp and numerous brooks, all drain into Merrimack.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Part of Pawtucket/ Wamiset Praying Town, 1653. Numerous other grants to individuals and towns between 1659 and 1693. Established as Town of Dracut, 1702. Considerable territory along Merrimack ceded to Lowell during 19th century.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Suburban industrial center on periphery of Lowell and southern New Hampshire. Located on highland above Merrimack River with reported native sites around Long Pond and axis of Beaver Brook to Merrimack. Originally within Wamiset Praying Town during mid-17th century with early English settlement along Merrimack flood plain (now within Lowell). Town center location shifted to uplands during early 18th century with some surviving period houses along early highways. Several milling sites on Beaver Brook developed during 18th century with expansion into textile factories by mid-19th century. Surviving mills remain at Collinsville and around Navy Yard (Pleasant St.) with early stone buildings. Development of adjacent Lowell during 19th century created suburban grid around original town center and streetscapes of working class housing types along trolley routes. Related development also includes summer cottages around Long and Peters Ponds and along Merrimack River at Kenwood with early 20th century commercial structures. Agricultural economy continues on upland with examples of Victorian farm houses and remains of early quarries along Nickel Mine Brook. Present development remains intense with suburban pressure from both Lowell and activity in southern New Hampshire, although rural landscapes survive intact along state boundary as well as French Canadian urban culture around mill villages.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Located on highlands north of Merrimack River. Conjectured trails follow east/west along river bluff as Methuen-Arlington-Pleasant Streets through Dracut center with possible branches to Long Pond as Old Nashua-Donahoe Rds. Cross link to New Hampshire around Peters Pond likely as Pelham St.

B. Settlement Pattern:

No period sites reported. Unspecified sites noted in town history on southeast shore of Long Pond and along Beaver Brook near 'New Boston

Village" and "Navy Yard Village" (Parker Ave.) (see Coburn, 1922 p. 53). Additional sites likely along Merrimack, especially where Trout and Nickel Mine Bks. enter; along all major brooks and adjacent to Peters and Masscuppic as well as Long Pond.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Access to major runs of anadromous fish in Merrimack, tributary streams and headwaters ponds. Fresh water fishing in ponds. Upland hunting, some agriculture.

D. Observations:

An important area probably containing many fish processing and habitation sites. A focal point for native activities on north side of Merrimack. Though period sites probably related to Pawtucket group, extremely little information available.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails improved as highways during 17th century including routes from Long Pond and along Merrimack.

B. Population:

Native population probably present throughout period on a seasonal basis. A few colonial families (from Ipswich) by 1620.

C. Settlement:

Probable native occupation at traditional fishing sites. Colonial settlement thinly scattered and close to Merrimack (Varnum Ave/Riverside St area -- now in Lowell).

D. Economic Base:

Traditional pattern of seasonal fishing for native inhabitants. Fishing and subsistence agriculture for colonial occupants.

E. Observations:

River formed an effective barrier to colonial settlement. Area probably contains an unusually high number of 17th century native sites for this reason.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1676-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Primary routes remain from 17th century, Old Nashua and Pleasant-Arlington Rds. Formation of town center in early 18th century creates

radial road pattern as Hildreth, Lakeview, Fisk and Broadway-Wheeler Roads, with east/west link across northern section as Crosby-Marsh Hill and Methuen Streets.

B. Population:

Slow growth during late 17th and early decades of 18th century. More rapid development after 1730. No specific figures available. Omitted from 1965 census.

C. Settlement:

Original settlement focus along Merrimack (Pawtucketville area). First meeting house built 1715 on west side of Flag Meadow Hill (south of Varnum Ave.). Location quite controversial resulting in construction of second meeting house, built 1748 (near corner of Pleasant and Sladen Streets). Rather amorphous town center extended along Pleasant Street towards Hovey Square. Some secondary settlements around milling areas on Beaver and other brooks. Scattered farms gradually spread through outlying areas.

D. Economic Base:

Fishing remained important -- for food and fertilizer. Some agriculture and grazing. Considerable lumbering with many mills: Hildreth/Goodhue, grist and saw mills, before 1739 on Beaver Brook (Navy Yard Village); Bartlett's sawmill, 1761, outlet of Peters Pond; other unnamed sawmills on Richardsons Brook outlet, 1926, and Double Brook (Varnum Road), 1763. Ephraim Hildreth's tannery, Pleasant Street, after 1755. Exploration for metals in Nickel Mine Hill area from 1710. Some taverns: Hovey's, about 1770, Hovey Square; others closer to Merrimack -- now in Lowell.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Houses of the period are extremely few; those that remain or that have been recorded consist of vernacular examples, nearly evenly divided between central-chimney two-storey and twin-chimney two-storey plans; at least one central-chimney Cape Cod cottage exists from the period. Extant houses are scattered, reflecting their development as farmsteads.

F. Observations:

With better transit across Merrimack after 1730 area developed around lumber, milling and agriculture.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Colonial highways remain in place with improvement of north/south road to New Hampshire from town center as Bridge Street and links to Lowell as Hildreth and Aiken Streets.

B. Population:

Although the population increased gradually until 1810 and rapidly thereafter, increasing approximately 35% for the whole period, much of this growth occurred in the vicinity of Pawtucketville and other sections of Dracut which were annexed to Lowell later in the nineteenth century; within the bounds of modern Dracut, relatively little growth occurred during the Federal Period. No known foreign-born population. Baptist Society formed and disbanded during the 1820s.

C. Settlement Location:

Some scattered new construction along Pleasant Street between Dracut Center and Donahoe Road.

D. Economic Base:

Continuation of agricultural economy. Cotton mill built at site of Hildreth and Goodhue grist mill, 1814 converted to woolens. Clothiers mill at adjoining Pleasant Street site by 1824.

E. Architecture:

Residential: No high-style apparent; the number of houses recorded for the period is too small to indicate clear-cut local preferences; examples include some rear-wall chimney plan homes in outlying locations and some central-chimney cottages in the vicinity of Pleasant Street.

Institutional: Central Congregational Meetinghouse built 1793-1794, Federalist style tower added 1820. Town Workhouse built 1782. Number of school districts unrecorded; however, several one-storey wood-frame schoolhouses with hip roofs were built after about 1798, suggesting that a re-districting may have occurred in the mid-1790s; by 1830 ten school districts existed although four of these probably occupied territory which is now part of Lowell.

Commercial: No recorded commercial development.

Industrial: Small, probably wood-frame textile mill built at Navy Yard Village, 1814.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Road system from early 19th century remains in place. No railroads through area.

B. Population:

Although population statistics record rapid growth up to 1850 and a rapid decline thereafter, most of this fluctuation reflects increases in Pawtucketville and Centralville, both of which were annexed to Lowell between 1851 and 1874. Population growth within the modern bounds of

Dracut was relatively small and localized. Foreign-born population, made up primarily of Irish immigrants was present after about 1845. Methodist Congregation organized 1849.

C. Settlement Location:

Continued scattered settlement along Pleasant Street; small villages formed around mills at Collinsville (1840s), around the junction of Pleasant Street and Lakeview Ave. and at Dracut Center.

D. Economic Base:

Paper manufacturing introduced at two sites, 1831 and 1840. Second cotton mill established at Collinsville, 1851 but converted to woolens by 1863. Merrimack Woolen Co. established at Navy Yard Village, 1854. By 1865 woolens produced annually were valued at \$570,000.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Housing of the period was made up mostly of modest side-hall plan houses and cottages with a slightly greater concentration of cottages near mills (Pleasant Street and Lakeview Avenue) and a slightly higher proportion of two-storey houses at Dracut Center. Greek Revival and Second Empire styles are relatively rare; most buildings of the period having been Italianate in style. Relatively few high-style examples were built with the exception of several "T" plan and "L" plan Italianate style houses on Mammoth Road and at Dracut Center; at least one ambitious Second Empire style house of the 1860s was built (Fox Avenue). Workers' housing, consisting mainly of double cottages and some double houses was built at Collinsville and near Pleasant Street and Lakeview Avenue.

Institutional: Methodist Church built 1849-50, style not recorded (may have been annexed to Lowell). Eleven school districts during period; however, four of them now are part of Lowell; one-storey, brick Federalist style school houses built during the 1830s; wood-frame Italianate style school houses built by mid-1850s. Private academy founded, 1833 (now in Lowell). Town Farm purchased 1831.

Commercial: No clear commercial center; probable presence of one and two-storey wood-frame buildings with gabled facades in each of the town's three centers of population.

Industrial: Wood-frame mills built at Collinsville about 1841; 2-3 storey, stone mills (Italianate style) built during 1860s at Navy Yard Village (Pleasant Street and Lakeview Avenue) on the site of previously existing mills.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Expansion of electric trolley lines in 1890s from Lowell to town center on Bridge -- to Long Pond as Lakeview-Stewart Streets and to Nashua

on Textile-Mammoth Streets through Collinsville -- with interurban to Lawrence along Merrimack (Route 110) including original concrete bridge (1912) over Richardson Brook.

B. Population:

Population declined 1870-1875, reflecting annexation of parts of Dracut to Lowell; after 1875, the population increased steadily, more than tripling for the period as a whole. Foreign-born population increased throughout period; the largest individual immigrant group was Irish until about 1905-15 when French Canadians became more numerous. St. Mary's Catholic Church organized at Collinsville during 1890s; Collinsville Union Mission (non-sectarian) organized 1897.

C. Settlement Location:

Major settlement occurred at Collinsville, along Pleasant Street between Donahoe Road and Dracut Center and, to a lesser degree, in several subdivisions of land along the Merrimack River.

D. Economic Base:

No new industrial development though both textile mills went through several fires and changing ownership, the American Woolen Co. taking over the Beaver Brook Mills at Collinsville in 1899. Discovery of nickel in Newburyport in 1875 awakened interest in the old mine at Nickel Mine Hill. Some ore was extracted but the inability of the organizers to develop a workable smelter led to its failure.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Very little high-style present; major local houses of the period consisted of suburban examples of Colonial Revival, Queen Anne and eclectic early twentieth century styles located at the periphery of Collinsville (particularly Lakeview Avenue) and at the periphery of Dracut. Some large-scale farmhouses of late Italianate and Victorian Gothic styles exist in the eastern section of the town; however, few of these display fully developed characteristics. Elsewhere, side-hall cottages (late Italianate, Victorian Gothic and Queen Anne styles) remained the most widespread type of housing. Workers' housing built at Collinsville consisted of side-hall cottages until the early twentieth century (ca. 1910-20) when a large number of Colonial Revival style double cottages were built. Working class housing along Pleasant Street was more eclectic, containing some two and three-family houses (ca. 1910). Bungalows seem to have been built in scattered locations after about 1910.

Institutional: Queen Anne style alterations made to Central Congregational Church, 1897; Union Mission Chapel built at Collinsville (ca. 1897); Catholic Church built at Collinsville, about 1905-10(?), late Gothic style. Seven school districts during period; multiple room (graded?) school houses built after 1865 at Center, Collinsville and E. Dracut (Methuen Street); 4-8 room schoolhouses built in same locations, ca. 1895-1906; opening of high-school not recorded in local histories. Late Italianate (nearly astylistic) Town Hall built ca. 1880-1900.

Commercial: Probable development of several wood-frame two-storey blocks in each of the town's centers of population; however, no real

commercial district developed; greenhouses built in scattered locations (ca. 1890-1915).

Industrial: Textile mill complexes enlarged at Collinsville (after 1886) and near the junction of Pleasant Street and Lakeview Avenue (1870s); new construction included 4 and 5 storey brick mills (late Italianate style), wool and cotton storehouses and related outbuildings.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Abandonment of streetcar routes in 1920s and improvement of local roads as autohighways by 1930s east/west as Route 113, and north/south as Route 38 through Dracut center.

B. Population:

Especially rapid growth until 1930 followed by a decline after which growth resumed 1935-40; no secondary sources record information on foreign-born population and new religious societies.

C. Settlement Location:

Same as preceding period with the addition of subdivisions laid out in the vicinity of Pleasant Street and partially developed (possibly resort) subdivisions near Long Pond and Peters Pond.

D. Economic Base:

Existing textile mills operated throughout period but with expansion. No other industrial development. In the 1920s described as a "pleasant farming and manufacturing town".

E. Architecture:

Residential: Little or no high-style present; new construction seems to have been made up mostly of modest Bungalow and Colonial Revival style cottages. A small number of two-deckers were probably built during the early 1920s in the south-central portion of the town (Pleasant Street). In lakeside (resort) locations, extremely simple rustic cottages/camps were built ca. 1925-40.

Institutional: No known new churches. Probable closing of one-room schoolhouses during period; Classical Revival style brick schoolhouses built west of Dracut Center (ca. 1920) and on Parker Avenue (ca. 1915-20); seven schoolhouses in use during 1920. Colonial Revival style public library at town center, ca. 1930.

Commercial: Some scattered farmstands of 1920s and concrete block garages, ca. 1915-30; no apparent commercial center.

Industrial: Minor expansion of mills until ca. 1920-30 with brick and concrete additions(?); no new complexes developed.

XI. SOURCES

Coburn, Silas R. History of Dracut, Massachusetts (1922).