

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

DUNSTABLE

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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MCH RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

Date: April, 1980

Community: Dunstable

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Located on rolling, occasionally rugged upland terrain. Western half of town largely glacial outwash plain; eastern portion has some exposed bed-rock as well as glacial outwash features. Generally a gravel soil. Drainage primarily north into Merrimack system--in western half via Nashua River, in central part via Salmon Brook. Extreme eastern sections drain directly into Merrimack. Except for Massapoag, very few ponds. Large areas of upland bog/swamp throughout town.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Established as Town of Dunstable, 1673, from large collection of individually granted lands along upper Merrimack and Nashua Rivers. Boundaries set out by Danforth survey, 1673. Large sections split off as new towns during early 18th century: "Nottingham," 1733 (now Hudson, New Hampshire); "Litchfield," 1734 (now Merrimack, New Hampshire); "Hollis," 1739. Massachusetts/New Hampshire line of 1741 placed most of remaining town in New Hampshire (later renamed Nashua). Massachusetts remnant of Dunstable enlarged by annexation of northeast section of Groton, 1747. Town split into two precincts, 1755. Eastern or first precinct incorporated as district of Tyngsborough, 1789.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Rural town on the periphery of New Hampshire suburban corridor. Located along Nashua River with native sites suspected along local valley of Salmon Brook from Massapoag Pond. Initial settlement from Merrimack River axis before King Philip's War but delayed by instability of frontier raids until early 18th century. Scattered farmsteads along Nashua valley with lumbering on uplands. Original town center now in Nashua, New Hampshire during mid-19th century, little industrial activity beyond local milling. Agricultural activity continued through mid-20th century along Nashua valley with recent pressure of suburban development from southern New Hampshire. Town retains large segments of authentic historic period landscapes and original town center.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Located along Nashua River valley with intermediate highlands to Merrimack. Conjectured trails link Nashua and Merrimack along Main-Pleasant-Groton Streets with ford presumed over Black Brook. Branch trails probable along Pleasant Street (Route 113) to Unkety Brook, along Pond Street to Massapoag Pond, and likely along axis of Main Street around Joint Grass Brook to New Hampshire line. A trail along east bank of Nashua is presumed to follow River Street from Groton.

B. Settlement Pattern:

No documented sites reported. Period sites possible on well drained terraces and knolls along Nashua River and Salmon Brook. Town history notes many artifacts from Massapoag Pond area (mostly archaic period).

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Anadromous fish runs in both Salmon Brook and Nashua River. Good hunting, trapping, gathering potential as well as for subsistence agriculture. (Possible slate quarry sites in western part of town.)

D. Observations:

Not an area likely to have much contact period settlement--rather a resource area and corridor for movement along Nashua River and Salmon Brook between confluence with Merrimack to north and pond region to south.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails remain as highways with primary route to town center between Groton and Merrimack as Main-Pleasant-Groton Streets during mid-17th century.

B. Population:

Probably some residual native occupants. No evidence of colonial inhabitants.

C. Settlement:

See above.

D. Economic Base:

Seasonal fishing, probably some fur trapping.

E. Observations:

Though technically part of town of Dunstable, too remote and inhospitable for settlement. Focus for the limited colonial settlement was around confluence of Nashua River and Salmon Brook with Merrimack (Nashua, New Hampshire).

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1676-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highways remain from 17th century with primary routes east/west through town center. Local roads radiate from meetinghouse by early 18th century as Westford, High-Thorndike and Fletcher Streets with cross links as Brook, Oak, Cross and Forest Streets.

B. Population:

Small colonial population after King Philip's War. However, continuous border warfare stifled development until 1730s, then slow steady growth. 54 families in 1746. Census of 1765 listed 758 people in 130 families and 90 houses.

C. Settlement:

Scattered farms throughout town by 1740, with no central focus. Division of town by Massachusetts/New Hampshire boundary in 1741 necessitated building of a meetinghouse. Extended controversy over location; finally built 1753 at corner of Forest and Main Streets. Cemetery also established. Town pound built further east on Main Street, 1765. Apparently little development of a town center either around meetinghouse or elsewhere.

D. Economic Base:

Agriculture and grazing. Probably fishing and some fur trapping as well. Some production of shingles and barrel hoops. A few mills: gristmill (Samuel Adams), outlet of Massapoag Pond, reputedly from 1680-1700; gristmill (J. Woodward), on Black Brook (?), from 1775. Other mills probable, but no data available. Ebenezer Kendall's tavern, about 1740, no location given.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Although the town was occupied during much of the period, it is likely that fewer than 40 houses were built within the present boundaries prior to 1776. Extant and recorded houses of the period are dominated by central-chimney vernacular plans with symmetrical center-entrance facades; a few examples of this type were built with 3/4 facades. A much smaller number of central-chimney cottages are also believed to have existed, included both symmetrical center-entrance and 3/4 facade. At least one brick cottage is believed to date from this period (1751); however, it is equally possible that this cottage dates from the late 18th century and that its Georgian features (watertable, etc.) represent country holdovers of outdated fashionable features. Several high-style mid- or late-Georgian doorways exist on scattered farmhouses, mainly in the southern and eastern portion of the town. It is unclear from existing information whether or not these features postdate 1776.

F. Observations:

A peripheral area of the larger, original town did not become viable until after frontier conditions stabilized about 1730. Then gradual development into rural farming town.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Roads remain from 18th century with improvement of link to Merrimack as Lowell Street turnpike.

B. Population:

Decline between 1776 and 1790 reflects the separation of Tyngsborough as a separate district, while the increase between 1790 and 1800 probably reflects the annexation of portions of Groton. After 1810 a small increase in population occurred, although a portion of this increase may have come as a result of the establishment of final boundaries with Groton. No known foreign-born population. Universalist Society formed, 1818; Evangelical Society formed 1829-1830.

C. Settlement Location:

Small village formed at Dunstable Center after ca. 1791; no other villages in town, scattered farmsteads.

D. Economic Base:

Primarily agriculture. Number of saw and gristmills increased adding waterpower or sites on Joint Grass Brook (Mill Street), and Unkety Brook (Kamp Street).

E. Architecture

Residential:

The largest number of new houses appears to have been made up of vernacular central-chimney cottages with symmetrical center-entry facades; many of these have attributed construction dates in the 1790s. Other examples of this period included central-chimney houses, some with late Georgian decorative details. The Federalist style was present by 1812 and was represented by a small number of rear-wall chimney plan houses and by several scattered high-style end-wall chimney houses built partially or entirely of brick. Decorative details were relatively simple even as high-style houses.

Institutional:

First Parish meetinghouse of 1750s moved to current town center and remodelled, 1791, appearance unknown; transitional Federalist/Greek Revival style meetinghouse built for Evangelical Society, 1830-31. One-story school house built at town center, 1789-90; 5 school houses built in 5 districts, 1806, 6th school district established 1820 and school built (?); appearance of school houses mostly unknown, although one near town center may have been built of brick, and one other was built of wood, one-story high with a hip roof.

Commercial:

No known development.

Industrial:

Small saw and gristmills.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Roads remain from early 19th century with focus upon town center. Railroad route of Worcester and Nashua (1849) along Nashua valley from Ayer.

B. Population:

Population remained stable until ca. 1850 after which a gradual decline began, broken only by a slight increase during the Civil War. Nearly no foreign-born population present (less than 2% of total population). No new religious societies formed.

C. Settlement Location:

Small amount of new construction at town center, otherwise no significant change in settled area.

D. Economic Base:

Agriculture. Annual production of sawmills reached \$38,100 in product value by 1865, including clapboard, lath, shingles, and barrel stoves. Hawk Brook sawmill (Pleasant Street) by 1856.

E. Architecture

Residential:

New house construction was limited mainly to side-hall and center-entrance Italianate style cottages, several side-hall and center-entrance houses and several Greek Revival style houses and cottages. Other styles of the period appear not to have been built; no high-style examples of the period seem to have been built.

Institutional:

Rebuilding of school houses probably occurred, although unrecorded in secondary sources.

Commercial:

Two-story wood-frame block with public hall and² storefronts built at town center (1860s), may have been only commercial block. Mineral Spring Hotel and bowling alley built near Massapoag Pond by 1856, closed by 1870s.

Industrial:

3 blacksmith shops (wood-frame one-story?) and 4 sawmills built toward end of period (1855-1865).

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Rail and road system in place from mid-19th century with secondary railroad through town center along Salmon Brook as Nashua, Acton and Boston (1873), (now abandoned) with original viaducts over major brooks. No trolley routes through area.

B. Population:

Gradual decline throughout period with the exception of a minor increase between 1895 and 1900. Small foreign-born population (12-15% of total population) made up of Irish and Canadian immigrants (no more than several families each). No new religious societies formed.

C. Settlement Location:

No growth of settled area.

D. Economic Base:

Agriculture. Source of greatest income from milk production, shipped to Boston (Hurd, p. 737). Sawmill products decreased in importance. No new sites established.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Virtually no new construction during period; some former farmhouses may have been restored as summer/country houses after c. 1890-1900 by residents of Lowell and Nashua.

Institutional:

Federalist Revival style meetinghouse built for First Parish, 1912-1913. School districts abolished c. 1870, only three school houses in use by 1890; 2-story wood-frame Colonial Revival style school house built 1895 as Central School (?). Late Queen Anne style library built 1907.

Commercial:

No known development.

Industrial:

Lumber mills established in preceding period seem to have remained in operation; no new development likely.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Abandonment of railroad through town center in 1920s and improvement of local highways as auto roads, notably Main-Pleasant Streets as Route 113 and Lowell, Main and Groton Streets as surfaced highways by 1930s.

B. Population:

Population decline from preceding period continued until 1925-1930 after which a gradual increase began. No recorded information about foreign-born population or new religious societies, although little change is likely from preceding period.

C. Settlement Location:

Small number of summer cottages built at Massapoag Pond; elsewhere, little change.

D. Economic Base:

Entirely agricultural. No further industrial development.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Nearly no new construction evident, except several rustic cabins in resort location. One or two ambitious Colonial Revival style houses (c. 1930) built near town center, some former farmhouses restored.

Institutional:

No known new development; school system probably fully centralized during period.

Commercial:

No known development.

Industrial:

No known development.

XI. SOURCES

Fox, Charles History of the Old Township of Dunstable (1846)
Gates, Curtis H., ed. Dunstable Village (1973)
Nason, Elias A History of the Town of Dunstable (1877)
____ The Nashua Experience (1978)