

# MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

## ERVING

Report Date: 1982

Associated Regional Report: Connecticut Valley

**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](http://www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc)  
[mhc@sec.state.ma.us](mailto:mhc@sec.state.ma.us) / 617-727-8470

# MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

Date: December 1982

Community: Erving

---

## I. TOPOGRAPHY

Erving's area of 14 square miles is the second smallest total for Franklin County towns. All but the westernmost and southernmost portions of town consist of moderate to rugged uplands. These uplands range between 800 feet and slightly over 1200 feet. The highest point is an unnamed peak (1221 feet) situated in northeastern Erving in the Erving State Forest. Other prominent elevations include Hermit Mountain (1206 feet), in central Erving, Rattlesnake Mountain (1067 feet) west of the village of Farley, and Poplar Mountain (1021 feet) in southwestern Erving. Westernmost Erving is comprised of floodplain and glacial late bottom deposited by the Millers and Connecticut rivers and prehistoric Lake Hitchcock. Several small tracts of floodplain are present in the Millers River situated on Erving's southern border.

The town's western and southern borders are delineated by the Connecticut and Millers rivers. The rapidly flowing Millers River was the site of the vast majority of Erving's 19th and 20th century mill operations. This river is fed by several brooks that flow west and south from Erving's uplands into the waterway. One of these tributaries, Keyup Brook, is fed by Laurel Lake, the town's only freshwater body.

## II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Originally established as Erving's Grant in 1752 by John Erving of Boston from unincorporated Province lands, its northern boundary was at the Northfield Line (1685) and southern boundary along Millers River with Ervingshire (Wendell). The western boundary was defined along Millers River with Montague in 1754 and an eastern boundary with Warwick in 1761, with Millers River district annexed to Orange in 1837. Incorporated as the town of Erving in 1838, Hacks Grant was annexed from Northfield in 1860 above French King meadows.

## III. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Erving is a highland industrial town along a primary corridor between Boston and Greenfield; native fishing sites are suspected along Millers River at French King meadows and Laurel Lake. It was settled as Erving's Grant during the Colonial period, with limited agriculture on the highlands from Northfield. It developed as a roadside village along the Fifth Massachusetts Turnpike from Athol during the Federal period with its economic focus established at Erving Center around the Millers River dam, including an original burying ground and a few surviving cottages. Significant development occurred during the Early Industrial period with regional railroad connections along

the Millers River corridor and expansion of Erving Center as the civic and commercial focus, including a Greek Revival church and period houses along Keyup Brook. An important economic center was established at Millers Falls from Montague after the Civil War, with a late 19th century residential district and secondary focus at Farley, including suburban Shingle style houses and a rare iron truss bridge of early date. Erving Center was maintained as the local civic and industrial focus through the early 20th century with brick paper mills intact around the railroad depot and a secondary complex at Stoneville. Millers River developed as an early auto tourist corridor along the Mohawk Trail with some period gas stations at Erving Center, monumental Art Deco French King Bridge, and summer cottages at Laurel Lake.

Present development most evident along Route 2, with serious economic decline noted in Millers Falls and Farley, while Erving Center is suffering from paper mill traffic eroding remaining historic fabric.

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

##### A. Transportation Routes

Erving was in a primary regional corridor from the central highlands to the Connecticut Valley with a probably east-west trail along the north bank of Millers River gorge following original Mohawk Trail (Route 2). A major north-south route from Connecticut Valley (Montague) to Squakeag (Northfield) apparently followed from Millers River fordway below French King Bridge as Meadow Road to Northfield Farms. A secondary connector from Keyup Brook (Erving Center) over highlands likely followed Mountain Road north to Squakeag.

##### B. Settlement Patterns

There were no reported native Contact period sites. Evidence of Woodland period occupation was exposed on Erving's western lowlands in the vicinity of French King Bridge. Undated rockshelters were reported in the uplands southeast of Rattlesnake Mountain. Period settlement probably focused on the town's western lowland, particularly in the Millers Falls area. Additional lowland settlement likely occurred in the general vicinity of the confluence of Briggs Brook and Jack's Brook and Millers River. Upland encampments may have been established near Laurel Lake, the relatively upper portions of Northfield Mountain, Rattlesnake Mountain and Poplar Mountain.

##### C. Subsistence Patterns

Native horticultural tracts had been established on the Millers River floodplain west of River Road. Fishing probably occurred primarily at Millers Falls on both the Erving and Montague sides. Additional fishing likely took place elsewhere on the Millers River, especially at the river's confluence with the several brooks that fed it in addition to Laurel Lake. Native

hunting probably occurred mainly on Erving's western lowlands.

#### D. Observations

Erving probably was most heavily occupied during the annual spring spawning runs of salmon, shad, etc. Fishing encampments probably clustered along those portions of Millers and Connecticut rivers that passed by the present villages of Turners Falls (Montague), Riverside (Gill) and Millers Falls (Erving). The Erving area may have fallen under the control of either the Squakheag or the Pocumtucks, since Erving was situated near the 19th century boundary between these two groups. Development of Millers Falls has probably destroyed a large portion of the town's probable native focal point. However, vestiges of period settlement may survive north of Millers Falls along the river floodplain and the terraced lowlands east of French King Bridge. The shore of Laurel Lake and the terrace on which the village of Farley is located should also be considered archaeologically sensitive.

### V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

#### A. Transportation Routes

There was improvement of the north-south trail from the Millers River fordway along Meadow Road as the Swampfield (Sunderland)-Squakeag (Northfield) path with the primary east-west route remaining as Mohawk Trail.

#### B. Population

There were no figures for the town's native population. Erving reputedly lacked a colonial population until ca.1800.

#### C. Settlement Patterns

Native settlement patterns likely were similar to those suggested for the Contact period.

#### D. Economic Base

Native subsistence patterns probably remained basically the same as those of the preceding period. Local natives very likely participated in the Anglo-Indian fur trade established in the Middle Connecticut River Valley in the late 1630s. Colonial residents of Northfield may have occasionally fished at Millers Falls and hunted in Erving's lowlands.

#### E. Observations

Millers Falls probably remained an important native fishing area during the Plantation period. Colonial interest in Erving was limited because of the prevalence of large quantities of high quality land in the lower portions of the Middle Connecticut River Valley and the area's location on Massachusetts' northern frontier.

## VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

### A. Transportation Routes

There was improvement of the north-south highway to Northfield with a bridge as the Millers River fordway (by 1775) from Meadow Road. The Primary east-west route remained as Mohawk Trail along the Millers River with a connecting highway over Rose Ledge as Schoolhouse Brook Road.

### B. Population

Erving may have been inhabited by small bands or individual families of natives during the Colonial period.

### C. Settlement Patterns

Some native camps may have been established adjacent to Millers Falls as part of the large population of hostile "River Indians" who occupied Deerfield, Greenfield and Northfield during King Philip's War. In the 18th century, the natives "Jack" and "Keyup" reputedly established habitations adjacent to Jack's Brook and Keyup Brook. Varying accounts locate these sites on the above-named brooks in Erving and Northfield.

There was no documented period settlement of Erving despite its inclusion in a large grant made to a group of Massachusetts proprietors in 1751. This land was subsequently sold to John Erving in 1752, the tract's second absentee landlord. However, Erving's proximity to the colonial settlements of Northfield, Gill and Montague and the presence of good agricultural land in western Erving suggest there was some settlement on the town's western lowlands and long Mountain Road, a period road.

### D. Economic Base

The Millers River area probably continued to be an important native fishing site.

Increasing colonial fishing, hunting and timbering probably took place in upland area such as Erving with the gradual spread of colonial settlement into Massachusetts' northern frontier.

### E. Observations

Future research should clarify Erving's relationship with the adjoining towns of Northfield, Montague and Gill. Did period settlement in these settlements spill over into Erving? Was John Erving leasing out tracts of land for settlement?

## VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

### A. Transportation Routes

The east-west route along Millers River was improved as the Fifth Massachusetts Turnpike (1799) following the Mohawk Trail

with the Mill Road bridge at Millers Falls and the connecting north-south highway to Northfield as Forest Street (Route 63). The secondary connectors from Erving Center to Northfield were located along Keyup Brook as North Road with a bridge constructed over Millers River to Wendell (ca.1805).

#### B. Population

The earliest population figures for Erving's Grant do not appear until 1810, when the district had the smallest population of any town then established in the county. In 1830, with 488 persons, it was still the smallest community, except for Monroe.

#### C. Settlement Patterns

Economic focus formed at Erving Center after the opening of the Fifth Massachusetts Turnpike (1799) with the Millers River dam (1803) and tavern (1816). Limited agricultural expansion occurred along the Connecticut River lowlands from Northfield and upland farms along Mountain Road.

#### D. Economic Base

Erving had an entirely agricultural economy, with substantial lumbering activity. Five sawmills were in use by 1830. The first dam across the Millers River was constructed by Colonel Asaph White (earlier active in Heath), who was probably brought to the town through his connection with the Fifth Massachusetts Turnpike. There, in addition to a toll house and hotel, White constructed grist, saw, and fulling mills. After 1818, when the hotel, and later the mill properties, were sold to Elisha Alexander, the place (now Erving Center) became known as Alexander's Mills.

#### E. Architecture

Very little construction was likely to have occurred in the Federal period and no structures are known to survive. The first settler of the town was Colonel Asaph White of Heath, who was said to have "built a log house in the wilderness" (Holland 1855:362) in 1801. Reference to log houses as the first form of house construction was common in newly-settled areas of Franklin County, but the 1801 date of White's house was the latest date encountered in the region. White also kept a public house during the period. The only other structure documented was a schoolhouse of ca.1820, built at Erving Center. At least one other schoolhouse, at Schoolhouse Brook on Route 2, had been built by 1830, when it appeared on the town map of that date. It was likely that other houses built between 1801 and 1830 were simple center chimney plan cottages.

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

#### A. Transportation Routes

Continued improvement of the east-west corridor occurred as the Fitchburg Railroad (1848), including a depot at Erving

Center, and improvement of the north-south axis to Northfield with the New London and Northern Railroad from Millers Falls (1850). There was expansion of the local street grid from Erving Center along Keyup Brook with Church and High Street and from Millers Falls (Montague) with River-Lester-Moore Streets from the Bridge Street crossing.

#### B. Population

Like other river towns in the county, Erving grew moderately during the Early Industrial period, with railroad construction adding new commerce and inhabitants to the town. By 1870 the town population stood at 579.

In 1855 the largest group of immigrants in Erving were 24 Canadians (about half the foreign-born population), while the Irish numbered only slightly better than a third of the non-natives.

#### C. Settlement Patterns

There was continued development of Erving Center as an economic and civic focus with the location of the Congregational Church (1842) and town hall (1847). The opening of the Fitchburg Railroad (1848) stimulated industrial expansion at Erving Center with the Washburn Company (1850). There was significant development of the economic center at Millers Falls from Montague with Millers Falls Company (1868), with a suburban residential district along Prospect Street. A secondary industrial village formed at Farley from the Wendell bridge.

#### D. Economic Base

Erving, like Orange to the east, began to develop a strong furniture industry -- a business which the two towns shared with the upper tier towns of Worcester County. Its coming is probably closely related to the arrival of the Vermont and Massachusetts Railroad (later the Fitchburg main line) in 1848. By 1855 industries at the Center included the pail factory of W. B. Washburn (out of Worcester County?), a chair seat factory begun by Isaac Baker in 1848 (later Hale & Gould; Noah Rankin after 1866); and the match woods factory of J. T. Trask. A mile east, in 1851 at Stoneville, Washburn and Jonathan E. Stone began a factory for making piano legs and cases.

Grout's Corner (now Millers Falls) had remained a small village until the hardware factory of Gunn & Amidon burned in Greenfield in 1868. In company with Henry Pratt, the Millers River Manufacturing Company was incorporated that year, and the new firm built a large complex in what is now Millers Falls. to this event was due the growth of Millers Falls in Montague and Erving.

#### E. Architecture

Residential: The earliest extant houses in Erving date from the Early Industrial period. During the period, clusters of

Greek Revival and Italianate structures developed at Erving and Millers Falls, and to a lesser extent at Farley. The earliest houses seem to be those at Erving; these include a number of center chimney plan Greek Revival cottages as well as several sidehall plan Italianate cottages and one Gothic Revival cottage with board and batten siding. Housing at Millers Falls and Farley in general appear to date after 1850 and consists primarily of sidehall plan and L-plan Italianate one-and-a-half and two-story houses. Probably the town's finest period structure is an asymmetrical plan bracketted Italianate villa at Millers Falls. Most of the houses built along the town's rural roads date from the Early Industrial period as well. Greek Revival and Italianate cottages employing sidehall or center hall (double or center chimney) plans were observed on Route 63 and on North Road.

Institutional: Several churches were organized in the 1830s, among them the Congregational (1832), Baptist (1835; in conjunction with North Orange) and the Universalist (1836). Of these, only the Congregational Society prospered (the Baptist church dissolved by 1839, the Universalist by 1848) and built a meeting house (1842). That structure, a story-and-a-half Greek Revival building with square belfry and steeple, stands on Route 2 at Erving.

## IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

### A. Transportation Routes

Fitchburg Railroad (Boston and Maine) remained as the primary east-west corridor with the Vermont Central as the primary north-south axis from Millers Falls. A trolley line proposed along Millers River through Erving Center from Orange to Montague was never constructed (ca.1900).

### B. Population

Between 1870 and 1915, Erving's population grew 101.7%, the fourth highest growth rate in the county. Much of this growth occurred in the first five years of the period, 1870-1875 (probably the strong showing of Millers Falls), and in the last fifteen years, as new paper mills went into operation at Millers Falls and Stoneville. A short period of growth 1885-1890 may reflect the growth of Farley.

French Canadians and Irish remained the dominant immigrant groups as late as 1905. By 1915, however, Erving's foreign-born population had risen to 17.8%, and was led by Russians (30%) and Poles (12%).

### C. Settlement Patterns

Millers Falls continued to expand as a residential district from Montague with a primary axis along Moore Street. Civic and commercial activities remained focused at Erving Center



along Route 2 (Mohawk Trail) axis with suburban expansion north along Keyup Brook. Secondary development continued at Farley, with an affluent residential district along Maple Avenue and an outlying industrial focus at Stoneville along the railroad corridor.

#### D. Economic Base

Probably the growing dominance of the furniture centers of Worcester County provided a deterrent to the indefinite expansion of the furniture industry in Erving. During the Late Industrial period, paper mills began to replace the furniture industry. Earliest was at the new village of Farley, and though the 1883 mill was located on the Wendell side of the Millers River, the small village of Farley developed on the north side. In 1902 the Millers Falls Paper Company built a mill at Millers Falls, followed eight years later by the Erving Paper Company, which built a brick mill, probably on the site of the earlier Stoneville mill. Both companies were run by Holyoke men. At Erving Center, the Washburn & Heywood Chair Company was the town's dominant representative of the furniture industry.

#### E. Architecture

**Residential:** The majority of the houses in Erving date from the Late Industrial period. These include almost all of the houses at Millers Falls and Farley as well as a number of houses at Erving and Stoneville. Most of the houses of the period are small one-and-a-half or two-story Queen Anne or Stick Style workers' houses with sidehall plans. Almost all of the houses at Farley, Erving and Stoneville were built before 1900. Of note at Farley are three somewhat more substantial houses of the 1890s; these include a hip roof Queen Anne house and a gambrel roof Colonial Revival house. A wider range of house types was constructed at Millers Falls, where residential development continued through the end of the period. There, in addition to simple sidehall workers' cottages, a few well-detailed Stick Style and Colonial Revival houses were also built along with several Queen Anne double houses and three flat-roofed triple deckers.

**Institutional:** Aside from the construction of a town hall (no longer standing) in 1874, very little institutional activity is documented in secondary sources. Six school districts existed in 1878. Field observation indicated the construction of a Queen Anne chapel (ca.1900) and school (ca.1890) at Farley and of a two-story fire station (ca.1910) at Erving.

**Commercial:** Very little commercial construction took place in the period. Commercial activity at Millers Falls centered in Montague while at Erving Center, few commercial buildings were built. The only period structures observed were a hip roofed Stick Style railroad depot and a two-story Italianate store with a gable roof and center entrance.

Industrial: Major industrial buildings were built at Millers Falls and Erving. The most notable architecturally is the Book Press Factory (1912) at Millers Falls, a well-detailed two-story brick structure. Other factories are utilitarian brick mills, two or three stories in height of pier and spandrel construction with flat or shallow gable roofs.

#### X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

##### A. Transportation Routes

There was significant improvement of the east-west corridor with the Mohawk Trail as auto Route 2 from Athol to Greenfield, including a bypass around Millers Falls with concrete bridges (1931) and a monumental Art Deco span across the Connecticut River at French King Bridge (1931). The secondary north-south highway from Millers Falls to Northfield improved as Route 63 with a local connector to Laurel Lake from Erving Center as Laurel Lake Road (Erving State Forest).

##### B. Population

Erving was one of the few towns in the county to continue its growth through the Early Modern period. Its 13.6% growth rate was the third highest in the county, though most of this growth occurred in the first five years, 1915-1920 -- presumably associated with paper mill expansion. In 1940 the town's population stood at 1,328.

##### C. Settlement Patterns

Local civic and commercial activities remained focused at Erving Center with expansion along the Mohawk Trail tourist highway (Route 2) and a secondary industrial focus at Stoneville. Limited residential development continued at Millers Falls with affluent expansion along River Road and commercial highway activities along Route 2 to French King Bridge. There was a gradual decline of Farley as a residential village and the development of upland recreational sites at Laurel Lake in the Erving State Forest from Erving Center.

##### D. Economic Base

No new industries identified, although the Farley mill was taken over by the Lindale Paper Company, a maker of boxboard. In 1937 a heel firm, subsidiary to the United Shoe Machinery Corp., was also reported.

##### E. Architecture

Comparatively little construction took place in the period, except at Millers Falls and at Laurel Lake. At Millers Falls, simple one and two-story houses, most with hip roofs, were constructed in the 1920s. Among these is a two-story concrete block two-family house of ca.1925. Another building built at Millers Falls

in the period was the two-story brick, rectilinear plan Erving Graded School (ca.1925). At Laurel Lake, a handful of hip and gable roofed one-story summer cottages were built in the 1920s. Most of these are well-kept shingled or novelty-sided structures still maintained for summer use. Another period building is a one-story concrete block garage on Route 2 at Erving.

#### XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

No inventory forms have been completed for Erving. Significant structures to be documented include all of the town's factories and institutional buildings as well as residential development at the villages of Millers Falls, Erving and Farley, and summer development at Laurel Lake. Of note are an Italianate villa and a concrete house at Millers Falls and a Gothic Revival cottage at Erving.

Industrial: The most outstanding industrial complex in Erving is the brick complex built by the Millers Falls Manufacturing Company, part of which, with its original wooden cupola, may date to the late 1860s. Equally important is the bridge at Farley over the Millers River built in 1889 by the New York firm of Dean & Westbrook. The pin-connected Pratt through truss is the only known example in the state to use the Phoenix Iron Company's patented wrought-iron "Phoenix columns." The bridge also retains its two richly-ornamented name plates on the portals at either end of the bridge.

Other complexes which should be surveyed include the two mills of the Erving Paper Company (the Erving Center mill appears to contain some late 19th century construction), and the mill of the Millers Falls Paper Company.

#### XII. Brown, Lilla L.W., et al., Erving, Massachusetts in Retrospect, 1838-1938 (Orange, 1938?). [Not examined]

Coolidge, Augustus, Historical Address Read at the Semi-Centennial Celebration in Erving, September 12, 1888 (Greenfield 1888).  
Mounted clippings from the Greenfield Gazette & Courier,  
22 September 1888. Copy in State Library.

A Completed Century, 1826-1926: The Story of the Heywood-Wakefield Company (Boston: printed for the company, 1926).