

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

FOXBOROUGH

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: Foxborough

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Located in rugged upland terrain between two major drainage basins; Neponset to northeast and Narragansett to south. Rocky, rough country with minimal amount of tillable land. Lowland areas are predominantly bog or swamp. Shepard's Pond is only sizable body of water.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Part of Dorchester New Grant (1636). Property of "Dorchester Proprietors of the Undivided Lands," 1713. Incorporated as Town of Foxborough, 1778. South boundary Old Colony Line (1640).

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Regional industrial town on main Boston-Providence corridor. Early axis of trail and Colonial roads in south part of town. Several attractive mill sites and local bog iron with 19th century industrial development. Specialization with straw hat craft industry and growth of town center with several fine period examples of Victorian styles and early industrial structures. Modern autohighway development on Boston-Providence axis with location of regional sports facilities.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500 - 1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Located along main north/south corridor between Neponset-Massachusetts Bay and Narragansett-Taunton. Primary trail appears to follow route of Mechanic and South Sts to Wading River, with conjectured branches along Cedar St around Shepard's Pond and Main and Chestnut Sts to headwaters of Charles River. Secondary north/south trail from Massapoag (Sharon) as Morse St in East Foxborough is also postulated.

B. Settlement Pattern:

No documented sites. Area around Shepard's Pond reported to have many Indian relics (Carpenter, 1890, p. 11).

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Hunting and trapping.

D. Observations:

Not the kind of area utilized much by Late Woodland people; too far inland. Rather, typical of "buffer areas" which apparently existed between native population groups - in this case Neponset to north and Wampanoags to south.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620 - 1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails expanded as highway routes. Primary link between Boston and Providence as 17th century post road - Mechanic and South Sts to Wading River junction with secondary branches on Cedar (Route 106) and Main and Chestnut Sts.

B. Population:

Extremely limited.

C. Settlement:

Only recorded European settlement, house built by Captain William Hudson, near Wading River, 1670 - Shepard's Pond on path to Boston.

D. Economic Base:

Apparently trade.

E. Observations:

As with natives, too far inland, too inaccessible for settlement. Site potential: Hudson's house location specified by Carpenter as "opposite site of present barn of Marcus Brown" where depression was still evident (Carpenter, 1890, p. 9).

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1676 - 1776)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highway systems remained from 17th century. Town center located in mid-18th century on Boston Post Road (Mechanic-South Sts) with secondary radial highways of period including Cocasset, Cross and Belcher Sts with lesser roads to upland fringes.

B. Population:

Only one family as late as 1716; several additional settlers by 1730s; insufficiently populated to support a meetinghouse until 1763. People from Dorchester, Dedham, and Medford.

C. Settlement:

No settlement until 1704, Jean Shepard purchased Hudson's house. Few and scattered farms. By 1730, eight farms laid out, but only four houses built. First house built in Foxborough Center, 1750. First meeting-house started 1763 and finished three years later (now site of current town center).

D. Economic Base:

Summer farming and grazing; winter lumbering. Some resources of water power and iron ore. A dam and forge on upper Neponset near Crack Rock Hill, 1734, Jedediah Morse. After 1737, iron ore extracted from Proprietor's lot No. 45 (southwest of Holmes Pond) and exported to Canton or Sharon. Some charcoal production for iron smelting.

E. Architecture:

Little likely remains from this period, as the population was small and relatively poor; some central-chimney Cape Cod cottages and half-Capes remain in scattered locations along early roads; a small number of 2-story central chimney houses also exist, principally along South Street. Few, if any, Georgian decorative details are evident. Other types of buildings (meetinghouse, workshops, etc.) appear to have been destroyed or altered beyond recognition.

F. Observations:

A small, struggling town during period. Off major transportation routes. Resources it had (lumber and iron) were more easily available elsewhere.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775 - 1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Colonial highways remained intact with location of main Boston-Providence turnpike at west edge of town as Route One (1806) with toll house at Walpole line, portions of original roadbed survive intact at Walpole line.

B. Population:

Steady growth throughout period amounting to a total income of 72%; 16 foreign-born residents arrive between 1820 and 1830; Baptist Church formed 1822.

C. Settlement:

Focused on town center; building occurred along roads leading to center, no side streets.

D. Economic Base:

Town remains poor throughout period, in 1781 was assessed the smallest state tax of any town except Hull; as late as 1830s was poorer than any other town in Norfolk County, except Dover (Hurd, p. 677). One of the most long-lived industries, surviving into the 20th century, was the Foxborough Foundry & Machine Co., established in 1781 by Uriah Atherton, who came from casting cannons at a foundry in Sharon. Its products included fences, hat presses, and stoves. Capitalized at \$20,000 in 1845, it far outranked most of the other mills in the town.

Although small grist and carding mills were located in East Foxborough and a hoe factory was sited on the Neponset, most of what industrial activity did develop - beginning about 1810 - was located on the mill privileges of the Wading River tributaries. In addition to the foundry, there were two textile mills, one of which - a stone mill with monitor roof built on Granite Street about 1825 - was converted to a residence at the height of the Colonial Revival a century later. Few of the mills survived more than a generation in the same hands or even producing the same product, and when accident befell them in the last quarter of the 19th or early 20th century, they were not rebuilt.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Mostly 1 ½ story cottages, with center-entrances and simple decorative details, built in scattered locations; small number of 2-story houses built near center; no high-style evident.

Industrial: Small-scale development; at least one stone mill with a monitor roof extant (MHC - Foxborough Farm 5).

Commercial: Nothing extant.

Institutional: Few buildings, most notable was a brick meetinghouse with Gothic decorative details (1822 - demolished).

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830 - 1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Road systems remained from early 19th century. Main Boston and Providence railroad located through fringe land in East Foxborough (1835), with secondary branch to Foxborough Ctr near mill sites built after Civil War (1870).

B. Population:

Increase throughout period, particularly rapid between 1840 and 1860; foreign-born population made up mostly of Irish, the largest number of whom arrived between 1840 and 1855; Universalist Congregation established (1844) followed by Catholic Parish (1859).

C. Settlement Location:

Major focus was Foxborough Center, with minor clusters at East Foxborough and Foxvale.

D. Economic Base:

Relatively diverse economy of 1830s became increasingly dominated by the manufacture of strawgoods. As an uncaptialized cottage industry in 1837 the total value of bonnets produced was 134% of the products of all other town industries combined. By 1860, with the town population at 2,879, the Union Straw Works (capitalized at a half million dollars) employed 3,000 persons (presumably many of them too young or otherwise uncounted in the census), and its products, said local boosters, made Foxborough's fame international.

At its height, the Union Straw Company had three plants. The main wood frame factory on Wall Street burned to the ground in 1900. The South Branch was at the foot of Cocasset Lake, and the West Branch on Main Street survives, occupied by an electric furnace manufacturer. The company's stone storage reservoir, built in 1858 on Powder House Hill, is occupied by the town historical society.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Most common house-types were side-hall cottages with Greek Revival and astylistic Victorian details, built at town center around South Foxborough, East, Foxborough and Foxvale as well as in scattered locations along South Street. Some boarding houses were also built at Foxborough Center.

The most elaborate residential architecture of the period is clustered around Main and Baker Streets at Foxborough Center. Extant examples include at least two temple-front Greek Revival Style houses, an exceptionally ornate Gothic Cottage of the 1840s (Baker Street) some simple Italianate houses and some simple Second Empire style houses and cottages. Built in the late 1860s or 1870s are several excellent Victorian Gothic houses (Main Street).

Industrial: Major complex of period was Union Straw Works, which was totally destroyed by fire in 1900; second branch of Straw Works, a wooden frame building, remains (Main Street).

Commercial: At least two Italianate style commercial/hotel blocks remain (MHC Survey) together with several altered late Greek Revival commercial buildings near the town center.

Institutional: Major survivors are 2 Greek Revival churches at town center; Italianate town hall built 1857 (demolished), and an exceptionally fine Gothic Revival Memorial Hall (1868 - at south end of Common).

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870 - 1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Road and railroad system remained from mid-19th century with street railway routes in early 1900s linking Foxborough Ctr with Mansfield and Walpole along Central and Cross Streets.

B. Population:

Population remained in 2,800 - 3,200 range from 1870 to 1900 - 1905, after which it increased briefly between 1905 and 1910; foreign-born population increased throughout period, largest groups were Irish, English and Nova Scotian.

C. Settlement:

Little expansion of settled area; Foxborough Center remained focus of town.

D. Economics:

Ancillary industries to Union Straw Works started. The total value of goods produced in Foxborough declined between 1865 and 1885, recovered partially by 1895 and began declining again in the early 20th century; the average number of industrial employees declined throughout the period.

Van Choate Electric Co., a manufacturer of electric lights and fittings, built an extensive modern plant in 18 along the east side of the railroad. Within four years the company failed. The town tried to find a replacement, and in 1908 succeeded in bringing in an offshoot from the Waterbury Industrial Instrument Co. to the vacant plant. The Foxborough Company, as it was later to become, a manufacturer of precision instruments with an international reputation, has expanded far beyond the original Van Choate plant.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Little building throughout town; small number of Victorian Gothic, late Italianate and Queen Anne Style houses, north of Common between Main and Baker Streets; scattered cottages and bungalows in varied styles.

Industrial: Destruction of the Union Straw Works; establishment of extensive factory east of Baker Street near railroad (1896) and construction of a complex of stylistic brick buildings at Glue Factory Pond (ca. 1900); otherwise, little new building.

Commercial: Little likely building, except possible replacement of former commercial blocks with one-story commercial blocks at town center.

Institutional: Rebuilding of several churches; construction of schoolhouses; development of State Hospital on Chestnut Street in 1890s; first water pumping station on Chestnut Street from 1890s; styles varied.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915 - 1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Road and railroad systems remained with abandonment of street railway in 1920s. Regional autohighway routes built in 1930s including primary Boston-Providence with new alignment on former turnpike Route One as superhighway with bridge interchange with Route 140 (1931) at Main St.

B. Population:

Steady growth of population after 1915, most rapid growth occurring between 1950 and 1970.

C. Settlement:

Wealthier country/suburban area emerged west of town center around Granite and Mill Streets (1920s - 30s); some expansion of built-up area

around town center (1920s - 30s); scattered residential development on tract subdivisions (after 1945); large-scale commercial development around Route 95 and in northern part of town (1960s - 70s).

D. Economics:

Except for the bleachery complex on Glue Factory Road, the town became increasingly dominated by the giant Foxborough Company.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Construction of some Colonial Revival style houses as well as restoration and conversion of earlier buildings (1920s - 30s) west of town center; bungalows and other modest revival style houses built at periphery of Foxborough Center (1930s); tract housing after 1945.

Industrial: Some expansion of existing mills, but no new mill complexes.

Commercial: Highway-related commercial development after 1931 along Route 1; alteration and demolition of some buildings at town center.

Institutional: Mainly construction of new schoolhouses and churches, varying contemporary styles.

XI. SOURCES

Carpenter, Robert W., History and Directory of Foxborough (1890).

Lane, Clifford W., This Was Foxborough! (1966).

Leggee, Richard E., ed., Foxborough, A Pictorial History (1978).

Sharon, Massachusetts - A History (1976).