

# MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

## FREETOWN

Report Date: 1981

Associated Regional Report: Southeast Massachusetts

**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 1981

Community: Freetown

### I. TOPOGRAPHY

Terrain is moderately rolling. Drainage in the west via Assonet River, in East by Fall Brook, Squam Brook to Long Pond. Some areas of swamp. Soils generally sandy to gravelly.

### II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Freetown was established as a town in July of 1683. Bounds between Tiverton and Freetown were established in 1700 and then again in 1713. In 1747 parts of Tiverton that were in the Massachusetts Bay Province were annexed. Part established as Fall River 1803. Part annexed to Fairhaven in 1815.

### III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Freetown is a pastoral community in Bristol County. The rather peculiar shape of the town has resulted in two distinct nodes of activity, one along the Assonet River and one in the east focussed on New Bedford and Long Pond.

Early Federal period saw introduction of shipbuilding at Assonet Village while the eastern portion of the town retained an early iron industry. Prior to the introduction of the railroad Assonet Village acted as a shipping point for goods from Taunton and Middleboro. Freetown ships like those from Somerset wintered in Georgia (Darien) until the Civil War. The decline of river shipping, the end of shipbuilding in 1848 and the loss of southern markets contributed to the decline of Assonet Village in particular and Freetown in general. Although there was introduction of new industry, the town quickly reverted to an agricultural base. At the turn of the 20th century a small summer colony developed at East Freetown with Long Pond as the focus. Freetown remained pastoral to the end of the study period.

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

#### A. Transportation Routes:

An extensive network of possible native trails reached from the Taunton/ Assonet Bay area into the interior (East Freetown) and south to Acushnet. A probable primary north-south route paralleled the Taunton River following North and South Main Street. A native crossing probably existed at the trail's junction with the Assonet River. At this point two alternate trails branched off to the northeast (following the Assonet River) and the southeast along Mill Street, Richmond Road and Slab Bridge/Bullock Roads, respectively. An additional conjectured native trail extended off the South and North Main Street trail along Copicut Road. The Slab Bridge and Bullock Road route served as the focal point of access routes following Cedar Swamp Road, Chace/ Mason Roads, Chipaway Road. Access to the southern portion of Long Pond may have been provided by a trail branching off the Chase/Mason Roads

route along an unimproved road and a portion of Beechbluff Road. The Taunton River provided the area's natives with a direct water route to the ecologically rich Mt. Hope and Narragansett Bays.

#### B. Settlement Patterns:

There were no confirmed Contact period native sites. However, two of the four reported Woodland period sites were suspected to have been occupied during the Contact and possibly Historic periods. A complex of native sites with Woodland period components (one with reputed Contact period component) was situated adjacent to the eastern bank of the Taunton River and south of Winslow Point. A fourth native site with a Woodland and possible Contact or Historic period components was located further north along the Taunton River immediately east of the Old Quaker cemetery. Two unidentified native sites were reported north of the East Freetown and Morton cemeteries, respectively. The former site was reputedly a native burial ground (tradition). Native settlement during this period probably concentrated in the vicinity of the Taunton and Assonet Rivers and Long Pond primarily because of the diverse resource base available in these locales. Long Pond was part of the Assawampsett Pond complex (Lakeville and Middleborough), an area of extensive native settlement. Additional native Contact period sites may have been established on the potential native planting grounds between High Street/Rock Road and Slab Bridge Road and adjacent to Braley Road. A small camp was possibly situated in the vicinity of Betty Spring. Native settlement was probably heaviest in the Freetown area during the winter and early spring. The native population probably migrated toward Narragansett and Buzzard's Bay with the onset of warmer weather in the late spring and summer.

#### C. Subsistence Patterns:

Assonet Bay, Taunton River, Long Pond and Freetown's interior woodland and marshland would have provided the native occupants with extensive sources of fish and wild game. Additional hunting, fishing and collecting likely were undertaken on the coast during the late spring and summer. Potential native planting grounds were confined to the banks of the Taunton and Assonet Rivers, between High Street/Rock Road, Slab Bridge Road and in the vicinity of Braley Road. The local natives probably engaged in European-Indian trade when considering Freetown's proximity to Narragansett Bay, a known region of pre-1620 European-Indian contact (e.g., Verrazanno, 1524).

#### D. Observations:

The native population congregated along the Taunton and Assonet Rivers appear to be part of a heavily settled riverine and coastal continuum which extended from Narragansett Bay east to Buzzard's Bay. The native settlement focused on the shore of Long Pond and was probably the southernmost extension of a regional settlement center situated in the vicinity of the Assawampsett Pond complex (Long, Little and Great Quittacas, and Assawampsett Ponds. (Both of these local settlement areas (Freetown) fell under the domain of the Pokanokets (Wampanoags) centered in Mount Hope, Rhode Island. Freetown's overall potential for archaeological evidence of Contact period settlement is excellent because of the town's continued rural nature. The Taunton/Assonet River and Long Pond areas should be considered particularly

sensitive archaeologically. Recent industrial development along the Taunton River near the Freetown/Fall River line has already destroyed a portion of this native settlement area.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620 - 1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

The native trail system was probably utilized by the area's limited colonial population.

B. Population:

No figures for the native or colonial population.

C. Settlement Patterns:

The available sources made no reference to native or colonial settlement locations. The native population probably continued to congregate along the Taunton and Assonet Rivers and Long Pond because of the virtual lack of English settlement.

English settlement was limited to no more than a handful of settlers, the first of whom may have been Kenelm Winslow. He reputedly settled in the Freetown area in c. 1659.

D. Economic Base:

No documentation of the native economy. The native population probably retained their traditional subsistence patterns although with an increased emphasis on European-Indian trade.

The Freetown area was utilized primarily as crop and grazing land by the 26 original purchasers (primarily Plymouth, Taunton, Marshfield, Duxbury residents) of the Freeman's Purchase, who received in 1659 tracts of land encompassing present Freetown and Fall River as far south as the Quequechan River.

E. Observations:

This period lacks a history of the post-1620 native settlement.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

The colonial transportation network developed primarily along the Taunton and Assonet Rivers and the easternmost portion of present Freetown. There was little evidence of direct routes between Assonet and East Freetown villages. South and North Main Streets and Richmond Road were probably laid out in the late 17th century or early 18th century in response to the colonial settlement in and around Assonet village. The North and South Main Street route also served as a primary riverine and coastal route. A local and regional route following Washburn Road, Mason Road and Route 18 was likely constructed in the East Freetown area in the early-mid 18th century.

## B. Population:

Population figures for both the native and colonial settlements are limited. In c. 1764, 59 natives resided in Old Freetown, most likely on the Indian Reservation established in the eastern portion of present Fall River (Dubuque 1907:34).

Old Freetown (included Fall River until 1803) had 1,492 residents in 1765. This figure increased 27% to 1901 residents in 1776.

## C. Settlement Patterns:

It appears by the early 18th century the vast majority of the native population of Old Freetown were settled on the Indian Reservation located in present Fall River. However, King Philip's Cave, located a short distance northeast of the junction of Washburn and Braley Roads was reputedly a native meeting site during the 18th century and 19th century.

The only English property probably destroyed in the Freetown area during King Philip's War was the handful of colonial homes probably present in the area, livestock and crops. English settlement took place shortly after termination of the Anglo-Indian fighting. Initial settlement focused near the mouth of the Assonet River, an area which provided immediate access to a major waterway (Taunton River), a diverse food resource base and potential mill power source. By the late 17th century-early 18th century, a primary settlement/industrial node was established adjacent to the junction of North Main, Mill and South Main Streets. Old Freetown's first meetinghouse was built here near the junction of South Main and High Streets in c. 1710. Scattered homes were erected north and south of this node adjacent to the Taunton and Assonet Rivers. A second settlement node developed by the early 18th century several miles to the east in the vicinity of present East Freetown (junction of Washburn and County Streets). This village was well situated since a large freshwater pond and potential mill power sources were within easy reach. Additional homes were constructed along Braley, Washburn and Route 18 in the early-mid 18th century. A village schoolhouse was constructed at Mason's Corner in c. 1762, probably in response to settlement expansion south of the original East Freetown settlement node.

## D. Economic Base:

No documentation of the native economy.

Although not clearly documented, it is assumed agriculture comprised a major facet of the colonial economy. Mill industry was developed early in this period with the majority of these operations locating along the Assonet River. A saw mill was built on the Assonet River near its junction with Locust Street in c. 1695. A fulling mill and grist mill succeeded this saw mill probably in the 18th century. A c. 1710 grist mill was erected further south immediately north of the intersection of Slab Bridge Road and Mill Street. Later in the 18th century, a saw mill, tannery and bark mill were built opposite this site on the other side of the Assonet River. East Freetown was probably the site of considerable 18th century industrial development when considering the large number of mill facilities present on Fall Brook in c. 1794 (Town Map of Freetown). Pre-1775 shipbuilding may

have taken place at the mouth of the Assonet River or on the shores of Assonet Bay when considering the settlement's relative reliance on the Taunton River as a major transportation route.

#### E. Architecture:

Residential: Freetown retains a large number of Colonial period residential structures in the two principal villages of the town, Assonet and East Freetown. These include a sizable percentage of houses dated to the 1720s; such a concentration of early Colonial houses is virtually unknown in the remainder of Bristol County. At least a dozen and a half period residences are known, many located at the village centers of the two settlements in a regionally rare clustered setting. Of the period structures known, most are center-chimney, two-story houses with five-bay, center-entrance plans and simple vernacular detailing. At least a few houses exhibit added lean-tos. The remaining period houses are center-chimney cottages; half-plan (three-bay) and full-plan (five-bay) cottages are represented in almost equal numbers. In some instances, additions of a single bay have been made to cottages in the town. Gambrel roofs are quite common although the gable roof form predominates; dormers are also common and some may be part of the structure's original construction.

Institutional: The earliest meetinghouse built in Freetown was erected in 1710 and measured 36' x 26' x 18'. This stood in present-day Fall River. A schoolhouse also stood on the same lot. Only one other meetinghouse was built at Freetown in the Colonial period (Quaker, 1725) but a number of schools were built throughout the period. Among these were two schools built in 1727, one school of 1748 (24' x 20') built at the town center and its replacement of 1773. The construction of these schools in the period is in contrast to other towns in the region, most of which did not construct schools until the Federal period.

#### F. Observations:

As with the previous period, the secondary sources provide little data concerning the native settlement. The post-war colonial settlement was characterized by the development of two discrete, self-contained villages as evidenced in the considerable distance separating Assonet and East Freetown and the lack of overland connecting routes. The suspected road network suggests these two villages had stronger economic and social ties with colonial settlements in present Berkley (Assonet) and Lakeville/Middleborough (East Freetown). A substantial portion of the Assonet settlement/industrial node survives architecturally and archaeologically. The East Freetown area also maintains much of its early-mid 18th century fabric.

### VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775 - 1830)

#### A. Transportation Routes:

Principle transport route Assonet River. General improvement of existing roads.

B. Population:

Population increase to 1800, decline in 1810 due to the incorporation of Fall River. Population stable to the end of the period.

C. Settlement:

Major industrial, residential, commercial node at Assonet Village, small node at East Freetown. Remainder of settlement widely dispersed farmsteads. In 1830 there were 220 dwellings in town.

D. Economic Base:

Assonet's position at the head of the tidewater made the village the closest port to the iron-producing towns of Middleborough and Lakeville, encouraging both iron foundries and nail works. (In some respects, by the 1830s Freetown had become the Wareham of Bristol County.) Between 1782 and 1848 Assonet River shipyards constructed 254 vessels--primarily sloops and schooners. Assonet wharves (at least nine in number) received large numbers of coastal and foreign trade vessels. As a measure of the amount of trade conducted on the river, one owner of several Freetown vessels, Edmund Hathaway, is said to have paid more customs duties at Dighton than any other three towns in the Customs district combined. In addition, the numerous mill privileges both at Assonet and East Freetown supplied regional needs in both lumber and grain. By 1794 the town had at least nine saw and grist mills in operation.

The forge established in 1704 continued in active operation, by 1820 producing scythes, axes, and other edge tools under Thomas Strobridge. In 1784 it had been joined by a furnace at East Freetown, erected to smelt Middleborough and Lakeville ores from Assawompsett Pond. By 1811 the furnace was in the hands of Bridgewater and Taunton interests. In 1818 it was sold to Pawtucket mill owners Samuel Slater, David Wilkinson, and others, and, as the Providence Foundry Co., now importing ore from New Jersey via Assonet wharves, produced machine castings for textile machinery. By 1832 the foundry was producing over 117,000 lbs. of machinery castings. A second foundry begun on Terry Brook south of Assonet was erected by Elkanah Doggett in 1827 to produce hollow ware.

E. Architecture:

Residential: The number of houses constructed in the period increased from the Colonial period. Most of these were built at Assonet. Of the two-story houses constructed in the period (approximately 20 surviving), center-chimney plans appear to have been built in almost equal numbers to the more up-to-date double and end chimney plan structures. Almost all of these are five bays wide with center entrances, but two Federal period houses of four bays' width are recorded. Cottages survive in somewhat greater numbers than houses, with approximately two dozen examples known. Of these, most are center-chimney, five-bay, center-entrance plan structures; several cottages of less than five bays' width were also observed, with two half-plan (three-bay) and two three-quarter plan (four-bay) examples noted. Also known are two end-chimney cottages of some sophistication, with fully elaborated entrance surrounds with leaded side lights and elliptical fanlights; both of these are located at Assonet.

Gable roofs are employed universally. One characteristic feature of Freetown's Federal residences is the use of a shallow hewn end-gable overhang. While the end-gable overhang is common in Bristol County, its widespread use in Freetown is particularly notable: almost all of the period houses and cottages in the town incorporate the end-gable overhang. Its origin is unknown and it would seem to be a retardataire feature for the period, unrelated to any known design motifs of the Federal style.

Institutional: Several churches were organized in Freetown in the Federal period: these were the First Baptist of Freetown (date unknown, presumed to be early in the period) and the Christian church of Freetown (organized out of Baptists, 1807). The Congregational church in Assonet constructed a new meeting-house in 1808-09; this is the present building at the village center. A two-story frame structure with a shallow projecting porch with pediment and pilasters, double entrances and a second-story Palladian window, the meetinghouse is surmounted by a square belfry with an open domed octagonal cupola. It was built by Ebenezer Pierce and the design has been attributed by 20th century historians to "John Bullfinch"; it seems likely that this is a misidentification of Charles Bulfinch, but there is no documentary evidence for such an attribution.

Seven school districts were established in Freetown. Most of the school-houses built were 20' x 24' in dimension. By 1820, that number had increased to 13.

Commercial: The only surviving commercial building of the period is the Old Corner Store (1828) at Assonet, a two-story, gable-roofed building, six bays long by three bays wide with two entrances on the facade.

Industrial: The only known industrial building of the period to survive is a Paint Shop on Elm Street, a two-and-a-half story frame building with a three-bay facade and center entrance.

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

### A. Transportation Routes:

Assonet River loses importance as period progresses. Improvement of existing Federal period roads. Old Colony and Newport Railroad 1835, Taunton and New Bedford Railroad 1840.

### B. Population:

Population declined to the end of the period, 1870 total population was 72% of the 1830 total. Foreign born population less than 2% of total in 1855.

### C. Settlement:

Little new residential development due to population decline, small secondary node at Braley's Station. In 1861 there were 287 dwellings in town, an increase of 60 dwellings in the 30-year period 1830-1860.

### D. Economic Base:

Assonet shipyards reached a peak of activity in 1834, when seven vessels were reported under construction at once. Decline in activity probably due to restraints



on vessel size imposed by the river. Last ship launched in 1848. Coastal trade also diminished after the arrival of the New Bedford & Taunton Railroad (1840) and the Fall River Railroad (1846). By 1861 only four schooners remained in service, with the trade wholly ended by the end of the war.

Iron activity also peaked early in the period. In 1837 the town boasted of two nail mills, two furnaces, with additional factories for axes, cutlery, and shovels, spades, and forks. Eight years later, only two nail mills remained, located on adjoining Assonet River privileges. N.R. Davis, after training in the machine shops of Taunton and the Colt factory in Hartford, established a firearm manufactory in Assonet in 1854. With substantial government contracts during the Civil War, the factory became the town's major industry after the war.

The availability of cheap transportation gave further impetus to agricultural production. In 1865 Freetown farms sent over \$10,000 worth of apples to market.

#### E. Architecture:

Residential: Comparatively few houses were built in the Early Industrial period as the focus of the area's economic base shifted down-river to Fall River. Nevertheless, some construction occurred with several notable structures built. Most of the houses built are sidehall and double chimney Greek Revival and Italianate houses and cottages, the cottages outnumbering the houses. East Freetown began to succeed Assonet in the period in terms of the percentage of houses built there in the period. Notable houses of the period include the Congregational Parsonage on North Main Street at Assonet, the Captain Washington Road house at Assonet on Water Street and the Allen House on County Road. The Parsonage is a one-and-a-half story double pile end chimney end gable with recessed portico and pediment on the gable end. The Read House is a three-story double chimney late Federal house with a prominent third-story monitor and later Italianate bays. The Allen House (c. 1865) is a Gothic Revival/Italianate cottage with round-head windows in a Palladian-derived form, polygonal bays and elaborate gable screens.

Institutional: Small splinter groups began to organize their own churches at the crossroads villages across the town. Most of the churches formed in the period were of the Christian denomination, with a Christian Chapel at Assonet (1832), Second Christian at Mason's Corner (c. 1833), Third Christian at Braley's Corner (c. 1843; extant) and Fourth Christian near the Rochester line (c. 1858). Of these churches, the Christian church at Assonet, a two-story Greek Revival building with a center entrance and two-stage square belfry, and the Braley's Corner Christian, a one-story Greek Revival building, are the only two surviving. The Freetown High School at Assonet is dated to 1858, but the structure itself, a one-and-a-half story hip-roofed double entrance structure with a cupola, does not appear to date from that time but seems to have been constructed c. 1900.

Commercial: The only commercial building of the period known to survive is the Village Store (1868) at Assonet, a one-and-a-half story Greek Revival/Italianate building, three bays wide with center entrance.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870 - 1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

General improvement of existing roads. Street Railway from New Bedford to Middleboro in 1899.

B. Population:

Population relatively stable throughout the period. Foreign born population in 1855 9% of total, by 1915 reached 18% of total.

C. Settlement:

Little new residential expansion outside of Assonet Village. In 1902 there were 385 dwellings in town, an increase of 98 in the 41-year period 1861-1902. East Freetown began developing as a small summer resort in 1902.

D. Economic Base:

By 1874, three bleacheries reported, processing cloth from Fall River mills, two remaining in operation at the end of the period. For many years, the Crystal Springs Bleachery was the town's largest employer. The period also witnessed the peak of N.R. Davis's manufacture of firearms.

By 1899 much of the land once under cultivation was covered by forest and undergrowth. Mixed farming was carried on, but the principal occupation of the farmers was in market gardening and milk producing for the larger markets. As an indication of the decline in general farming, many farmers were importing their hay from other towns to feed dairy cattle.

Throughout the period, the town's forests supplied boxboard, shingle, and lumber mills. In 1875 six mills produced \$12,000 worth. By 1914 there were still seven sawmills in town. Eight poulterers (five in the Assonet area), four milk dealers, and seven cranberry growers were also listed in the directory that year. By the 1870s, one of the state's earliest trout hatcheries had been established in East Freetown. By the end of the period it was supplying both railroad dining cars and ocean liners.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Very few houses were built in the period. Most of those constructed were built along the back roads of the town. The more substantial of these are one-and-a-half story sidehall Queen Anne cottages while the range of houses constructed continues down the scale in simplicity and size to a number of one-story, two-bay wide cottages of the most modest character. A few multiple-family hip-roofed Queen Anne tenements were built adjacent to the Fall River boundary on North Main Street.

Institutional: The Town Hall at Assonet was constructed in 1888; this is a two-and-a-half story hip-roofed Queen Anne/Stick Style structure designed and built by a local builder/architect, Charles C. Marble. Also built in the

period was the Town Library (1895), a one-and-a-half story hip-roofed Colonial Revival building with an offset hip-roofed entrance tower, the East Freetown Christian church (1888), a center-entrance one-and-a-half story Greek Revival church with a projecting porch in the Queen Anne style with Stick Style details, and a school (c. 1880) on Copicut Road at East Freetown.

Industrial: The only known industrial building for the period was the Crystal Springs Bleachery at East Freetown, built in 1882 and burned in 1955.

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

##### A. Transportation Routes:

General improvement of existing roads. No regional highways designated.

##### B. Population:

Population relatively stable with mild fluctuations to the end of the period. Foreign born population 11% of the total in 1930.

##### C. Settlement:

Little residential expansion. Major settlement remains Assonet Village.

##### D. Economic Base:

For most of the period, the town's major employer was the Crystal Springs Bleachery, though taken over as the Crystal Springs Finishing Co. when the original company failed in 1935. Two other Assonet River privileges were occupied by textile reclaiming and finishing plants.

In 1923, the New England Oil Refining Co. purchased a large number of farms along the coast to build a refinery.

##### E. Architecture:

The only structures of the Early Modern period which were observed in the survey are located along County and Braley Roads in East Freetown. Most of these are simple Colonial Revival cottages and bungalows with hip or gambrel roofs, while a few are very modest one-story houses of two bays' width. The only institutional building noted is the Freetown Grange (1916) at East Freetown, a one-story hip-roofed shingled vernacular structure.

#### XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

The Freetown survey is thorough and documents most of the town's pre-1850 residential and institutional structures and most of the institutional structures postdating 1850. Industrial structures and later residential structures need further documentation.

XII. SOURCES

A History of the Town of Freetown, Massachusetts, with an Account of the Old Home Festival, July 30th, 1902 (Fall River, 1902)

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