

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

GILL

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.

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COMMUNITY: Gill

I. Topography:

Gill is one of the smallest towns in Franklin County. The town is located in the Connecticut River Valley only a short distance from the Massachusetts/Vermont line. The town is dominated by a complex of moderated uplands that cover all but the eastern and southern periphery of the town. These uplands range between 500 feet and 700 feet in elevation. Two points reach over 700 feet: Pisgah Mountain (816 feet) in southwestern Gill and Darby Hill (743 feet) northeast of the previous peak. A narrow strip of floodplain stretches from the village of Riverside to the northeastern most portion of Gill. The latter area is broken by three small hills, Stump Barnard and Grasssy Hills. None of these extend over 480 feet in elevation. Recent construction of a large dam at Turners Falls has inundated a sizable tract of floodplain below Riverside village. Local drainage is good, excluding several marshy areas situated in the uplands. Two major waterways define three of four of the town's boundaries. The Connecticut River demarcates Gill's eastern and southern bounds while Falls River delineates the town's western boundary. The Connecticut is the site of Turner's Falls an impressive natural falls, Falls river is the Connecticut River's primary local tributary and flows south into the Connecticut above Turner Falls. Gill's only freshwater bodies are two small ponds, Otter Pond and Shadow Lake, Situated in the northernmost portion of town.

II. Political Boundaries:

Originally included as part of Deerfield grant of 1673 extending east to Connecticut River with Squakeag (Northfield) and Swampfield (Montague). Included as part of Greenfield district in 1753 with northern boundary defined along original Deerfield line at Falltown (Bernardston). Established as town of Gill in 1793 from Greenfield with western boundary along Fall River. Northeast section (Mount Hermon) annexed from Northfield in 1975 and Great Island annexed from Montague in 1801. Name change proposed to Glencoe in 1858 never adapted.

III. Historic Overview:

Rural suburban hill town on primary corridor between Greenfield and Orange with connections to Bernardston and Turners Falls. Located on eastern periphery of Greenfield highlands at critical juncture of Connecticut River with important native fishing area at Riverside above Turners Falls extending along Bartons Cove to the Narrows, and likely sites around Grassy Hill to Connecticut meadows. Attempted settlement from Deerfield at Turners Falls disrupted by historic Riverside attack during King Phillips War and continue native raids through early 18th century. Connecticut

River lowlands settled along axis of Main Road from Grassy Hill by Colonial period with some remaining houses. Gill center established as civic focus after Revolution expanded through early 19th century with Greek Revival church in town common rebuilt from original meetinghouse. Primary agriculture remained along Connecticut River meadows with period farmsteads intact on Main Road and Greek Revival cottages in uplands to West Gill. Riverside developed as suburban district of Turners Falls after Civil War with some Victorian houses on Bridge Street. Location of private boarding school established extensive campus on Mount Herman by early 20th century including power plant and farm buildings. Location of Mohawk Trail auto route along Connecticut preserves monumental Art Deco bridges at French King and Turners Falls. Present development most evident as commercial activity along Route 2 corridor from Turners Falls and suburban housing on scenic sites from Greenfield. Town center retains authentic village character with agriculture maintained in Connecticut River lowlands to Northfield.

IV. Contact Period (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Located at important junction of regional routes around Connecticut River falls. Primary north-south trail apparently followed from Fall River fordway (Greenfield) as West Gill Road with alternate branch to Ashuelua Brook (Gill Center) and Connecticut lowlands likely as Franklin-Cross Main Road around Grassy and Barnard Hill. Connecting trails to Turners Falls fishing stations probable around Bartona Cove in Riverside from Fall River fordway with likely cross to south bank at the Narrows. Secondary fordway at Fall River probable as Bassom Road to West Gill and branch trail to Connecticut meadows from Dry Brook (Gill Center) along River Road.

B. Settlement Patterns:

There were no clearly identified native contact period sites. However, the presence of several native sites with Woodland period components, some high quality agricultural land and a major fishing site suggests native settlement was extensive in Gill during the Contact period. Period occupation probably concentrated on the Connecticut River floodplain particularly in the general vicinity of village of Riverside and in northeastern Montague. Evidence of Woodland and Contact or Plantation period occupation has been recovered from the former area and the bluffs immediately north of the village. An additional site with Middle and late Woodland period components has been reported further east on an upland location in southeastern Gill. Additional lowland sites may have been located on the lowlands adjacent to the upper portion of Falls River and Otter Brook. The most likely locations for upland period sites would be Mount Herman, Stump Hill, Barnard Hill and Grassy Hill, all of which are situated amidst or adjacent to northeastern Gills floodplain.

C. Subsistence Patterns:

Native horticulture probably occurred primarily on the floodplains of southwestern and northeastern. Fishing focused at Turner's Falls adjacent to the village of Riverside, Barton and Doctor's Islands and the larger tracts of floodplain situated in eastern Gill. Hunting probably was undertaken in these lowland locations along with scattered upland sites.

D. Observations:

Gill appears to have been one of the most heavily populated areas in the Connecticut River Valley study unit during the Contact period. Populous horticultural villages were probably established in the vicinity of the village of Riverside and in the northeastern part. The local native population most likely was affiliated with the Pocumtucks who in the 17th century were centered in Deerfield. Gill has excellent potential for surviving period sites especially on the floodplains and associated hills of northeastern Gill, those adjacent to Tracy Mountain and Barton and Doctors Islands. Although moderately developed native Riverside village probably still contains archaeological vestiges of period settlement. Submerged period sites may remain in Barton's Cove depending how extensively the cove has been dredged.

V. Plantation Period (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails remained as regional routes with primary connections around Turners Falls from Deerfield over Fall River fordway. Probable north-south path maintained as West Gill Road to upper Connecticut Valley with alternate branch along Main Road to Grassy Hill.

B. Population:

Gill probably maintained a substantial native population throughout this period. The town's colonial population consisted of no more than several families.

C Settlement Patterns:

Native settlement patterns most likely were similar to those suggested for the Contact period until late in the period. The Mohawk attack of Pocumtuck settlements in c.1664 resulted in the destruction of a number of villages including that of "Peskeomscat" which reputedly was located on both sides of the Connecticut River floodplain in the vicinity of Turner's Falls.

Colonial settlement was scattered and short-term. At least two homes were established a short time prior to the outbreak of King Philips's War (1675). They were reputedly erected on two separate lowland locations situated on the Mohawk Trail in Riverside village and near the southern terminus of River-Road. These sites were abandoned with the outbreak of Anglo-Indian conflict in 1675.

D. Economic Base:

Native subsistence patterns were probably similar to those described in the Contact period section. The development of an english market for native furs likely encouraged increased native hunting and trapping of fur bearing animals.

The colonial residents probably undertook limited crop production, hunting and lumbering. At least one resident was hired to oversee livestock grazing in Gill by Deerfield residents (Slyvester 1879: II, 765). It is highly unlikely any industrial operations were established in Gill during the Plantation Period.

E. Observations:

Gill appears to have remained one of the primary Pocumtuck settlement sites until the Mohawk attack of c.1664. Attempts should be made to determine if native settlement continued in the remaining years of the Plantation period. The colonial period settlement is poorly understood. Future research should be devoted to determining the initial date of settlement, settlement makeup, origins of settlers etc.

VI. Colonial Period (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

West Gill Road remained as primary north-south regional route from Greenfield with alternate loop to Grassy Hill and Connecticut valley as Main Road from Turners Falls. Secondary roads of the period probably included Bassom- Center Street as east-west connector and River Road to Northfield ferry.

B. Population:

Several hundred natives have claimed to have occupied the native village situated on the present site of the villages of Turner's Falls (Montague) and Riverside in 1675 and 1676. However, most of this population was killed or dispersed in the course of the colonial attack on Peskeomsuit in 1676. Gill had a small post-1675 population. Substantial colonial settlement did not occur until c.1776.

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C. Settlement Patterns:

Local native settlement focused on the above Riverside village site. This location was also the site of native defensive pallisade reputedly situated on Fort Hill. As mentioned previously, this native stronghold was destroyed in 1676 by an English force. Any reoccupation that occurred later in the period was probably limited to short-term small to moderate sized camps. The upheaval of Anglo-Indian conflict during the late 17th and 18th centuries would have made it difficult for natives to establish long-term village settlement.

Colonial settlement was poorly documented. The available secondary sources made vague references to possible colonial homes being erected at several scattered locations including Bascom Road slightly east of its junction with Falls River, the southern end of River Road and on Grassy Hill between the end of King Philips War and the mid-18th century. These isolated homesteads were occupied for only a short period of time because of the vulnerability to native attack. The first permanent colonial settlement did not take place until c.1776.

D. Economic Base:

The native occupants of the Fort Hill settlement complex sustained themselves with fish caught at Turner's Falls, crops grown on floodplain agricultural plots, hunting and captured colonial livestock.

Colonial residents probably maintained economic pursuits similar to those mentioned in the Plantation period section. There is no reference to industrial development.

E. Observations:

Gill and the nearby towns of Northfield, Greenfield, Montague and Deerfield were the primary locations of the hostile native forces and families that attacked the colonial river settlements in the study unit during King Philips War. Research should focus on reconstructing during the makeup of the Fort Hill village and its occupants. Particularly interesting is the presence of two native "forges" in the village. Parts of the settlement may still survive in Riverside village, Barton Cove and Doctors and Barton Island. Primary documents should be examined for evidence of colonial settlement more extensive than detailed in secondary sources. Despite the area's exposure to native attack, the fertile lowland of Gill may have been attractive enough to some colonial settlers to settle in such a location. Upland settlements were established in the northwestern portion of the study unit in locations just as vulnerable to native attack and far less attractive than Gill during the Colonial Period.

VII. Federal Period (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Location of meeting house at Gill center (1794) created secondary connectors to town common including Boyle and North Cross Road to Bernardston and Center Street to West Gill. Other highways of the period included improvement of Main Road as primary axis to Turners Falls with Mountain Road around Mt. Pisgah and Barney Hale Road to Barton Cove. Connecticut River ferries maintained to Northfield from River Road and Otter Run meadows.

B. Population:

Gill was not incorporated until 1793. Between 1800 (population 700) and 1830, Gill grew by 23 percent, reaching 864 in the latter year. Not until the late 1880's would Gill again report as many residents.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Location of meeting house (1794) established civic focus at Gill center. Primary agriculture remained along Main Road in Connecticut Valley meadows with expansion of upland farming long Otter Brook plain to Bernardston. Secondary settlement maintained at Turners Falls (Riverside) and along Country Road to West Gill and Fall River valley as upland farming.

D. Economic Base:

Entirely agricultural economy with small saw and grist mills established on Fall River and Dry Brook. The largest recorded manufactured product in 1832 was the home production of palm-leaf hats (\$2900), probably begun in the late 1820's. The town was noted for rich grazing and tillage soils and early developed a reputation for corn and rye crops. Excess production was sent overland to Boston or to other river towns to the south.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Approximately a dozen houses of the Federal Period survive in Gill. Most of these are cottages with center chimney plans; the predominance of the cottage form reflects Gill's late settlement and incorporation. The few houses of the period tend to be located in the northern half of the town, with examples noted on Main Road at Gill Center, Grassy and Barnard Hills and Mount Hermon. Most houses observed were double interior chimney, center hall plan structures; the prevalence of center hall plans in combination with the town's late settlement probably indicates that most houses were built after 1800, if not after 1815. In contrast to the seeming concentration of houses to the north, cottages appear to have little focussed location, with examples found in dispersed, discrete and

isolated settings across the town. Federal cottages were observed on Main, West Gill, Center and North Cross Roads. The finest house of the period is a gable front sidehall plan structure at Gill Center with a pilastered facade end gable pediment and entrance surround with pediment. It was probably built ca.1825.

Institutional: Gill is fortunate to retain its original 1795-1805 meetinghouse. As originally built, the meetinghouse had dimensions of 50' x 40'; begun in 1795, it was not completed until 1805. The present Greek Revival appearance of the two-and-a-half story, three bay by six bay meetinghouse dates from an 1848 remodelling in which a two-stage belfry and spire were added. Other institutional activity included the organization of a Methodist society in 1803, with a meetinghouse (demolished) built in 1826 at Gill Center, and the construction of the first schoolhouse in 1793. Three schoolhouses stood in the town in 1830

VIII. Early Industrial Period (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Main Road continued as primary axis to Gill center from Turner Falls with Connecticut River ferries to Northfield. No railroads constructed through area.

B. Population:

Gill's population slowly declined until 1865, reaching a low point of 635 in the latter year. By 1870 the town reported a net loss for the period of 24 percent.

In 1885, the town had 33 foreign-born residents, or 4.5 of the total population that year. Of these, most were from Ireland (16) or England (10).

C. Settlement Pattern:

Gill center remained as local civic focus with primary farming district along Connecticut Valley as tobacco production. Economic development of Turners Falls (1867) established River-side as adjacent settlement. Upland farming remained active in West Gill along Fall River.

D. Economic Base:

Economy remained almost entirely agricultural. Benjamin Barton is reputed to have made experiments in raising silk cocoons in the early 1830's. A small tannery (employed two men), woodenware shops (employed three), and the home production of palm-leaf hats (180 women occasionally were also important).

In 1865 Gill, though the second smallest town in the county,

in land area, led the county in butter production.

E. Architecture

Residential: Perhaps as many as two dozen houses and cottages of the period survive in Gill. Of these, cottages are the predominant form. Almost all of the buildings are simply detailed Greek Revival and Italianate structures either with sidehall or center hall (double interior chimney) plans. In general the more substantial houses and cottages are located along Main Road north of Gill center. Among the structures located there are several sidehall plan cottages with recessed entrances and temple fronts. Period houses and cottages were observed on Main, North Cross, Boyle, Center, River and West Gill Roads.

Institutional: Very little institutional construction took place in the period. The only building known to have been built is the present Town Hall (1867), a two-and-a-half story Greek Revival structure with a square belfry. The Town Hall was constructed by builder Eli Thompspon.

IX. Late Industrial Period (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Improvement of connections from Turners Falls to Riverside with opening of Connecticut River suspension bridge (1878). No street railways constructed through area although suspected omnibus operation from Turners Falls Bridge. Connecticut River ferries maintained to Northfield through end of period.

B. Population:

As a result of the development of Riverside, Turners Falls across the river, and the Mount Hermon School, Gill was one of the few towns in the county to report a rising population in the Late Industrial period, recording a growth rate of 45.6 percent. Between 1870 and 1895, the town grew by 65.7 percent, reaching a high of 1,082 persons in the latter year. After 1895, however, this advance stopped, and by 1915 the number of residents stood at only 951.

In 1905, Gill had an immigrant population of 13.6 percent, probably a reflection of the Turners Falls mill workers living in the Riverside area. The largest single groups were English and Canadians.

C. Settlement Pattern

Continued expansion of Turners Falls and opening of suspension bridge (1878) expanded suburban district of Riverside. Civic focus remained at Gill Center with agriculture maintained in Connecticut Valley lowlands. Establishment of Mount Hermon

school (c.1900) linked Main Road settlement to Bernardston.

D. Economic Base:

Several factors gave Gill an economic boost in the late Industrial period. In the 1860's, with the re-establishment of the Connecticut River log drives, Holmes, Wood & Co. began the extensive sawmills at Riverside which five years later were incorporated as the Turners Falls Lumber Company. In 1875, the lumber company reported an annual product value of \$17,000 -- a figure which also represented the total value of Gill's manufactured product that year.

A second factor in the development of Gill was the establishment of the Turners Falls Company, and the laying out of what was hoped would be an extensive manufacturing city in the late 60's and early 70's. With the completion of a suspension bridge connecting Turners Falls and Riverside in 1878, Riverside "rapidly grew into favor among the businessmen of Turners Falls as a place of suburban residences." Turners Falls also became an important market for Gill farm and dairy produce. In 1880 Gill was fifth in the county in egg production.

The founding of the Mt. Hermon School in 1881 both increased the town's population and opened up a new market for farm and dairy products. The whole place, the Greenfield Gazette noted in 1892, "bids fair to become quite popular as a resort of city people."

E. Architecture:

Residential: the most significant new development of the period occurred at Riverside, which began to be built up as a suburb of Turners Falls. At Riverside, modest sidehall and double chimney center hall plan houses and cottages in the Italianate, stick and Queen Anne styles began to be built in 1870's and 80's. Development at Riverside continued through the end of the period, with some two-story hip roofed, four square plan Colonial Revival houses and a few two-family houses built in the 1890's and after the turn of the century. Elsewhter in the town, residential construction was limited to very modest Italianate an Queen Anne cottages, one to two stories in height.

Institutional: major institutional construction took place at Mount Hermon after the founding in 1881 of the Mount Hermon School. Among the buildings constructed there between 1881 and 1915 are several frame and brick Georgian and colonial REvival dormitories, a rock faced granite Gothic Revival chapel with an offset octagonal tower and a large hip roofed brick Georgian Revival classroom building. At least one other ~~institutional~~ building, the shingled, hip roofed Colonial Revival Riverside School (ca.1910) was also noted.

Commercial: The only commercial building noted in the town is a two-story frame Vtalianate/Queen Anne store (ca.1875) at Gill Center.

X. *Early Modern Period (1915-1930)*

A. *Transportation Routes:*

Significant improvements of east-west corridor from Greenfield to Boston with auto highway Route 2 as Mohawk Trail bypass around Turners Falls (1931) including monumental Art Deco concrete bridges over the connecticut at French King Rock and at Turners Falls dam with short span over Fall River. Riverdale suspension bridge destroyed in 1936 flood with piers remaining intact at Bridge Street.

B. *Population:*

Gill's population fluctuated in the 900's in the Early Modern period, finishing in 1940 with a net loss of 20 persons.

C. *Settlement Pattern:*

Riverside remained as suburban district of Turners Falls with a-to highway commercial development from Mohawk Trail (Route 2). Gill center remained as local civic focus with continued expansion of Mount Hermon campus and primary agriculture along Connecticut Lowlands.

D. *Economic Base:*

No new industries identified. Farming was the chief occupation, with dairying and truck gardening yielding the best livelihood (WPA Guide).

E. *Architecture:*

Very little residential construction occurred in the period. Some modest Colonial Revival cottages were built at Riverside. Also noted were simple summer cottages along the Connecticut River as well as very simple cottages on West Gill and Main Roads. The Slate Library (1921) a small concrete block building with a colonial revival entrance, was built at Gill Center. The only major construction took place at Mount Hermon School where some dormitory and classroom buildings were built. Among these are neoclassical and Georgian Revival buildings in brick as well as more modest frame Colonial Revival dormitories of Semi-domestic scale.

Industrial: The most spectacular and sole identified artifact of Gill's engineering and industrial history is the monumental French King Bridge, completed in 1932 as part of the Route 2 improvements at that time. At its completion it was awarded the American Institute of Steel Constructions' Annual Award in Merit for the most beautiful steel bridge.

XI. Sources

"Gills Centennial Clebration", Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association. History and Proceedings 3 (1890-1898), 175-213.

Stoughton, Ralph M., History of the Town of Gill, Franklin County, Massachusetts 1793-1943 (Gill, 1978). (NOS, Not examined).