

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

GROTON

Report Date: 1980

Reconnaissance Survey Town Reports, produced for MHC's Statewide Reconnaissance Survey between 1979 and 1987, introduce the historical development of each of the Commonwealth's municipalities. Each report begins with an historic overview, a description of topography, and political boundaries. For the purposes of the survey, the historic period has been subdivided into seven periods: Contact (1500–1620), Plantation (1620–1675), Colonial (1675–1775), Federal (1775–1830), Early Industrial (1830–1870), Late Industrial (1870–1915), and Early Modern (1915–1940/55). Each report concludes with survey observations that evaluate the town's existing historic properties inventory and highlight significant historic buildings, settlement patterns, and present threats to these resources. A bibliography lists key secondary resources.

Town reports are designed for use together with a series of town maps that demarcate settlement patterns, transportation corridors and industrial sites for each historic period. These maps are in the form of color-coded, polyester overlays to the USGS topographic base map for each town on file and available for consultation at MHC. For further information on the organization and preparation of town reports, readers should contact MHC.

Users should keep in mind that these reports are now two decades or more old. The information they contain, including assessments of existing knowledge, planning recommendations, understanding of local development, and bibliographic references all date to the time they were written. In some cases, information on certain topics was not completed. No attempt has been made to update this information.

Electronic text was not available for digital capture, and as a result most of the reports have been scanned as PDF files. While all have been processed with optical character recognition, there will inevitably be some character recognition errors.

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MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

DATE: April, 1980

COMMUNITY: GROTON

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Located on rolling, often rugged upland terrain, bisected by Nashua River valley. Drumlins and other outwash features dominate landscape. Becomes quite rugged in sections away from river. Generally a gravel soil, loamier along Nashua. Broadly meandering Nashua River is primary drainage system with Squannacook entering from west and numerous small streams from east. Ponds in eastern quarter of town drain NE into Merrimack via Cow Pond and Salmon Brook. Large areas of upland swamp/bog.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Established as Plantation of Groton, 1655; border with Tyngsborough is only surviving remnant of original grant line. Considerable loss of territory during 18th century due to formation of new towns: Harvard, 1732; Shirley, 1753 and Peppperell, 1753. Other territory ceded to towns of Westford (1730) and Dunstable (1753) as well as to New Hampshire (1741). Additional territory lost by formation of Town of Ayer, 1871.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Historic rural town on periphery of western axis to interior highlands. Located on Nashua River valley with several regional ford sites, numerous ponds and reported native village on west bank. Early frontier of settlement with trading post along river and town center on terrace established by mid-17th century. Growth severely retarded by Indian wars through early 18th century, although some garrison houses of First Period apparently survive around town center. Agricultural expansion during 18th century with several well-preserved Colonial period houses, primarily of cottage plan in highlands with two-story examples in town center. Groton became affluent regional focus during early 19th century with numerous high-style houses along village main street including brick-end Federal examples of substantial size and early brick schools. Limited industrial potential with few water power sites, except for West Groton on Squannacook, which retains original railroad mill village of mid-19th century including brick owner's homes and period factory. Some soapstone quarrying and brickmaking along Nashua valley railroad axis, but town center maintained restricted residential scale and increasing importance as historic village. Establishment of boarding school created complex of high-style institutional buildings around town center by early 20th century, including Neo-Gothic chapel and English style brick dormitories. Town remained outside immediate zone of suburban development from Boston and southern New Hampshire through mid-20th century with authentic period landscapes and village center maintained by active preservation effort and restriction of commercial development, although fringe land uses predominate in eastern and western interior highlands.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Located along Nashua River valley with surrounding highlands. Conjectured trail routes converge on east side of river from southeast and northeast crossing at documented fords approximately as Route 225-W. Groton Road and Route 119-Main Street and fan out across highlands. Most secure trail location follows Littleton-Forge Village Roads (Route 119) from town center to Forge Pond (Westford) with south branch to Littleton and to Nona-coicus Brook (Ayer) as Sand Pond Road. Other primary routes appear to follow Old Ayer Road to town center along James Brook with eastward branches from Hollis Street to Martins Pond Road around Baddacook Pond and possibly north as Parker Road, branch north from Hollis-Chicopee Row possibly as Longley Street following Nashua east bank, and from town center east as Lowell-Old Dunstable Roads around Burnt Meadow Swamp. Logical cross links appear to follow Indian Hills-Nutting Road and perhaps Lovers Lane around Lawrence Academy Hill. The connections to the Nashua River ford sites are problematic, but appear to follow the axis of Main Street (Route 119) to Nod Road, and logically Mill Road to Fairgrounds Road and along river bank. On the west side trail routes appear to branch from ford site west to Squannacook River as Hill/Townsend Roads and south along meadows as Town Forest Road. Other route possibilities include Whiley Road to Duck and Whitney Ponds.

B. Settlement Pattern:

No documented sites; town history mentions only one "village" on west side of Nashua near Wrangling Brook (Tercentenary, p. 45). Despite lack of data, an area with high probability for period sites. Likely locations include well drained terraces and knolls along Nashua and major tributaries, especially near fords, rifts and confluences, as well as adjacent to ponds.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Access to seasonal fish runs in Nashua and Salmon Brook. Freshwater fishing in ponds. Good agricultural land in Nashua valley. Potential for extensive hunting/gathering. Sufficient and varied resources capable of supporting a sizable population.

D. Observations:

An area with good potential for important period sites; located on main trail route, good resources. Probably related to Nipmuck people (upland, freshwater pond orientation). Note: presence of soapstone outcrops - potential for late Archaic sites.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails remain as local highways with focus of routes upon Groton center by mid-17th century. Field division roads of the period include Farmers Row, Broad Meadow and Peabody Roads. Primary highway to Boston remains as Littleton Road (Route 119) and the Old Dunstable Road to the Merrimack.

B. Population:

Limited colonial occupation after 1660; about 10 families mainly from Watertown. Slow, gradual growth. Estimate of 300 inhabitants by end of period.

C. Settlement:

Initial colonial settlement - a reputed fur trading house (John Tinker) at mouth of Nod Brook, 1656. Linear village established along Hollis/Main Streets (on both sides of James Brook). First meetinghouse built, 1666. Location uncertain but probably near old burying ground. Assigned house lots and tracts of both upland and meadow. Estimate of 40 structures by end of period including five garrison houses (one "a mile distant from the rest"). Few, if any, outlying farms.

D. Economic Base:

Despite interest in fur trading, area settled for tillable land and meadow. Cattle raising a major concern. Gristmill built by John Prescott, 1673, on Nonacoicus Brook (now in Harvard).

E. Observations:

A promising community which developed steadily after establishment. However, located at the extremity of the frontier and therefore highly vulnerable to attack.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1676-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highways remain from 17th century with improvement of Nashua fordways as bridges by mid-18th century at Main Street (Route 119), Fitches Bridge Road, and West Groton Route (Route 225). Secondary radial roads from town center include Common, Chicopee, Nod-Sand Hill-Reedy Meadow Roads with cross link around Prospect Hill as Gay-School House Roads. In West Groton a radial system develops during 18th century from Squannacook mill site as West Groton, Pepperell and Townsend Roads.

B. Population:

Abandoned during King Philip's War. By 1680, about forty families re-established. Slow growth during next several decades due to ongoing hostilities. Rapid growth after conditions stabilized about 1730. Census of 1765 listed 1,443 people in 242 families and 174 houses. Census of 1776 listed 1,639 occupants.

C. Settlement:

Town burned, March 1676. Reoccupied by 1678. Second meetinghouse built 1680 (School and Hollis Streets). Town gradually rebuilt. Third meetinghouse built 1715 (Lowell and Main Streets) causing shift in town center. Second meetinghouse converted to first school, 1917. Fourth meetinghouse built 1754 (also Lowell and Main Streets). Settlement slowly extended out from town

center but continued raids inhibited process until after 1725. A few scattered farms on west side of Nashua after 1710. Secondary locus developed in West Groton by 1750.

D. Economic Base:

Agriculture and grazing. Orchards also important. Some lumbering. Several mills: grist (J. Shattuck) Nashua River at Main Street, 1709; saw (John Chamberlain) Martin's Pond Brook, after 1720; grist (Gilson's) Baddacook Brook, about 1720; grist and saw (Tarbell's) Squannacook, West Groton, 1744; an unspecified and undated mill, James Brook, off Old Ayer Road. Brickyard on N. Main Street, early 18th century. Bog iron ore dug in northern part of town--sent to Chelmsford, Westford founderies. Little information on taverns; a few mentioned--Bower's, from 1755; Trowbridge's, no date.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Majority of examples from the period were central-chimney two-story houses of vernacular design; other house-types present (although in smaller numbers) were twin-chimney two-story houses and a small number of central-chimney Cape Code cottages (perhaps as few as 6). It is likely that a few high-style Georgian houses were built or that high-style trim (such as corner pilasters, modillioned cornices, etc.) was applied to some vernacular houses. At least one Georgian style house may have been built (Main Street), although secondary sources offer varying dates of construction from the early 1770s to the late 1790s.

F. Observations:

Town suffered major raids in 1676, 1689, 1704 and 1723. Gradual development despite these with a major surge of growth after 1730. By end of period, prosperous agricultural town.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Colonial highway system remains in place with improvement of Littleton-Main Street as primary highway. Local turnpike in West Groton from Fitches Bridge over The Throne as Old Turnpike Road by early 19th century, now abandoned way.

B. Population:

Following a sudden population increase after the Revolution, Groton's population grew slowly through most of the remainder of the period; however, these totals may be partially deceptive as sections of Groton were annexed to neighboring towns during the period, thus the possibility exists that population growth may have been slightly larger and that population increases in the town center were balanced by losses in sections ceded to other towns. No foreign-born population recorded for period. The Union Congregational Society (1825) is the only recorded new religious society for the period.

C. Settlement Location:

Relatively dense linear village developed along Main and Hollis Streets. Although less densely developed than the village, Farmers' Row became more built up with substantial farmhouses.

D. Economic Base:

Agricultural base. Continuation of Colonial period mills. No identified manufacturing. Soapstone quarry opened and worked from 1828 vicinity of Nod Brook and Longley Street.

E. Architecture

Residential:

A full range of house-types from the period is present. The most lavish examples tended to be built along Main Street and Farmers' Row where some high-style late Georgian was evident; however, the largest number of high-style houses were of Federalist design, beginning as early as 1793 and employing such details as shallow central pavillions, brick end-walls, low hipped roofs, and a variety of decorative mouldings. The high quality of much of what remains suggests the presence of one or more skilled master builders or architects, or, perhaps, the employment of architects from other towns. The middle level of housing for the period seems to have been divided evenly central-chimney, as late as 1818, twin chimney and rear-wall chimney plans, all two stories high with center entrance facades and simple Federalist style entries. Cottages were also present included a small number of central chimney and rear-wall chimney plan cottages.

Institutional:

Union Congregational Church built 1827 (appearance unknown). Approximately 9-10 school districts active by c. 1810, the majority of school houses were built of brick, one-story high. Groton Academy (now Lawrence Academy) founded 1792, existing school house used for academy (?).

Commercial:

Commercial activity present in village, although mostly conducted from parts of merchants' houses. Separate store buildings were built by 1815 and one brick store was built prior to 1831; it is unlikely that any row buildings were constructed. Several inn/taverns were built through the early 19th century along the town's major through road, all recorded examples were essentially domestic in scale and details, although at least two had brick end additions built to accommodate part of business.

Industrial:

No known development except for existing grist and saw mills.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Roads in place from early 19th century with focus upon Groton Center. Nashua River valley becomes railroad corridor to New Hampshire from Ayer with Worcester and Nashua (1848) along James Brook around town center and Shirley. Townsend and Peterborough (1848) along the Squannacook through West Groton.

B. Population:

Population statistics show a steady increase throughout period; however, much of this increase occurred in Groton Junction, now the town of Ayer. Based on extant structures, it seems likely that Groton's population grew with slightly greater rapidity between c. 1830 and c. 1845 than it did after c. 1845 when the town's regional importance began to diminish. It is also likely that the town's foreign-born population was relatively small and made up primarily of Irish immigrants. New religious groups included a Baptist Society (1832), a Millerite congregation (early 1840s), and possibly a Presbyterian Society, although references to this society are extremely vague.

C. Settlement Location:

Continued growth at town center, particularly at the western end of the village along West, Pleasant, North Main and Hollis Streets. Minor villages developed at West Groton, Vose, and at the junction North Main Street and Nod Road during the 1850s-1860s.

D. Economic Base:

Starch factory, 1832 at present Hollingsworth & Vose site, but failed soon after. Paper mills began 1830s (Vose site), 1841 (Nashua River). Both acquired by Lyman Hollingsworth (1852, 1846 respectively) for manufacture of waterproof paper, by 1865 producing \$170,000 worth of product annually. Two tanneries south of Groton center active through period. Home production of boots and shoes reaches \$108,000 by 1855. Large unidentified plough factory employed 125 and produced \$200,000 worth of agricultural equipment in 1865.

E. Architecture

Residential:

As in preceding period a range of housing was built; however, high-style houses were relatively fewer. Several high-style examples exist for each contemporary style (Greek Revival, Italianate, Second Empire) except for Carpenter Gothic. Some examples, including several side-hall plan houses made use of Federalist style decorative details well into the 1830s. More modest houses made use of Federalist style decorative details well into the 1830s. More modest houses were mixed in numbers between rear-wall chimney, 2-story plans with center-entrance facades and side-hall plan houses (Greek Revival and Italianate style) often with the gabled facade set perpendicular to the street. While some Greek Revival and Italianate style side-hall cottages were built in the town center, they were more common in the outlying villages of West Groton, Vose and an unnamed cluster at Main Street and Nod Road. Virtually no modest examples of Second Empire style architecture existed.

Institutional:

Baptist Church built 1841 (Greek Revival style); First Parish Meeting-house remodelled in Greek Revival style (1840), Millerite Church built during early 1840s (appearance unknown). Little information regarding schoolhouses available from secondary sources; extant structures suggest that district schools remained in use and that many of the existing Federalist style brick school houses were rebuilt in the Italianate style between the 1850s and 1870s; after 1859 a high school existed in the first story of the town hall; a two-story brick school house (c. 1850-60) was built at the junction of Champney and Hollis Streets. A two-story, brick, Italianate style Town Hall was built in 1859. Academy buildings built for Lawrence Academy 1840s, burned 1868 and replaced with 2-story brick Second Empire style building (1869-71). 1862, Camp Stevens established by Federal government, exact location unclear from secondary sources alone (may partially have been in Ayer), after Civil War, the camp was closed and its buildings demolished and moved.

Commercial:

Commercial buildings seem primarily to have been two-story wood-frame blocks with gabled facades, both Greek Revival and Italianate styles represented. At least one brick store building was constructed (1835). However, commercial activity remained scattered along Main Street and did not develop around row buildings. By 1856, three railroad depots had been built.

Industrial:

Several water-powered mills constructed, mostly of wood-frame construction until c. 1851, when a brick paper mill was built. No major industrial complexes were developed; it is likely that wood-frame workshops continued to be the town's main industrial building type during the period.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Road and rail system remains from mid-19th century with extension of secondary railroads north/south through town to New Hampshire as Acton and Dunstable (1873) along Cow Pond (now abandoned way) and Milford and Pepperell on west bank of Nashua (now abandoned way) with late 19th century stone piers at Fitches Bridge Road (bridge itself late 19th steel truss). Trolley route between Westford and Ayer on private way around Fletcher Hill and Forge Village Road by early 1900s.

B. Population:

Population fluctuated in range of 1,862-2,253 with a gradual tendency upward, although there appears to have been no sustained growth during this period; it is also unclear whether or not population statistics included boarding students at the town's two private schools. Much of the population increase during this period was made up of foreign-born residents who increased from approximately 10% of the total population in 1875 to approximately 18% of the total population in 1915; the largest single immigrant group was Irish, throughout the period. Methodist Society at West Groton (1885), Episcopal Church present ca. 1884, Catholic Parish at West Groton (ca. 1905).

C. Settlement Location:

New settlement continued in the same areas as in the preceding period.

D. Economic Base:

Strawboard factory built at West Groton, 1875, followed shortly by manufacture of leatherboard, said to have here been first produced in U.S. Incorporated 1899, Groton Leatherboard still extant. Manufacture of wooden boxes (and later wooden reels) begun 1883 at Thompsonville (Squannacook River near Townsend line), relocated in West Groton in 1890s. Paper products principal manufactured product of period (\$204,000, 1875) followed by leatherboard. Agricultural products valued at \$234,000, 1885.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Range of housing period although total number of new buildings was small. High-style Colonial Revival (c. 1895-1915) and eclectic early twentieth century estate houses built along Farmers' Row and in scattered locations in the central portion of the town; nearly no high-style Victorian Gothic or Queen Anne style seems to have been built. Modest side-hall plan houses (Queen Anne and late Italianate styles) were built at the western and northern edges of Groton Center, and to a lesser extent, at West Groton. Side-hall plan cottages (Italianate, Victorian Gothic and Queen Anne styles) were built mainly at West Groton and Vose as were a small number of bungalows (c. 1910).

Institutional:

Baptist Church remodelled 1875 (Italianate style); Christian Union (Methodist) Chapel built at West Groton, 1885 (late Victorian Gothic style), Episcopalian Chapel built at Groton School c. 1884 (appearance unknown), Catholic Church built out of former Episcopal Chapel, c. 1905.

Town-owned schools consolidated into two graded schools by 1914, one school house at West Groton (1913-elements of Classical Revival) and at Groton Center (1914-eclectic/Spanish Mission design); Second Empire/Victorian Gothic style brick high school building constructed at Groton Center, 1870s. Firehouse built at West Groton, 1886; Renaissance Revival style library built at Groton Center, 1893. Lawrence Academy enlarged by the construction of brick Colonial Revival style buildings c. 1910-15 (?). Groton School founded by Episcopal Church, c. 1884, Colonial Revival/Queen Anne style campus developed 1884-1889, c. 1910; English Perpendicular style church built c. 1900-1902. It seems likely that the strong associations of the Groton School with upper-class Bostonians and New Yorkers may have resulted in more local buildings being designed by major architects than would otherwise have been the case.

Commercial:

Basically the same trends as in preceding period; little new construction seems to have occurred as the town center declined in commercial importance.

Industrial:

Brick, two-story mills built at several sites of which the largest was at West Groton; mostly utilitarian design.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Abandonment of secondary rail and trolley routes during 1920s; improvement of local highways as Auto roads including Routes 111-119 and 225 through town center with concrete period bridge (1931) over Nashua at Main Street.

B. Population:

Fluctuation throughout period with a small increase having occurred by the end of the period. Information regarding new religious societies and foreign-born population is not available from secondary sources.

C. Settlement Location:

Little or no expansion of settled areas with the exception of Lost Lake where summer cottage development began after 1924.

D. Economic Base:

No further industrial development identified. Paper mill at Nashua River burned, 1930s (?). Agriculture predominated.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Some architect-designed, high-style Colonial Revival style houses and masters' cottages seem to have been built near the Groton School (c. 1915-1930) and along the southern portion of Farmers' Row. Elsewhere new construction was scattered and of varying quality. New construction in the vicinity of Lost Lake probably consisted of rustic cabins.

Institutional:

Late Gothic Revival style Catholic Church built at West Groton (1929). Colonial Revival style public high school built 1928. It is likely that some of the Colonial Revival style buildings at both Lawrence Academy and the Groton School were built during this period.

Commercial:

Some one-story row stores may have been built at Groton Center during this period; however, those which now exist may also postdate 1940.

Industrial:

Some enlargement of mills at West Groton and Vose with utilitarian brick and concrete additions.

XI. SOURCES

- Butler, Caleb History of the Town of Groton 1848
Green, Samuel Natural History and Topography of Groton (2 volumes) 1912
Historical Sketch of Groton 1894
Groton, MA. Tercentenary Committee. 300th Anniversary, 1655-1955. 1955