

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

HEATH

Report Date: 1982

Associated Regional Report: Connecticut Valley

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

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

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

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

The activity that is the subject of the MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report has been financed in part with Federal funds from the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. However, the contents and opinions do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of the Interior. This program receives Federal financial assistance for identification and protection of historic properties. Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Age Discrimination Act of 1975, as amended, the U.S. Department of the Interior prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, disability or age in its federally assisted programs. If you believe you have been discriminated against in any program, activity or facility as described above, or if you desire further information please write to: Office of Equal Opportunity, National Park Service, 1849 C Street, N.W., Washington, D.C., 20240.



MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
William Francis Galvin, Secretary of the Commonwealth
Chair, Massachusetts Historical Commission
220 Morrissey Blvd.
Boston, MA 02125
www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc
mhc@sec.state.ma.us / 617-727-8470

MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

DATE: 1982

COMMUNITY: HEATH

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Heath is situated on the eastern periphery of the Hoosac Range, the southern extension of the Green Mountains. Local terrain is characterized by rugged uplands generally reaching over 1700 feet above sea level. These uplands are some of the highest in Franklin County. The greatest elevations include Underwood Hill (1902') and its sister peak (1909') immediately south. Both are located near the town's border with Whittingham, Vermont. Others include Burnt Hill (1858') and an unnamed peak (1810') situated in southeastern Heath. The village of Heath is flanked on its north by two hills well over 1750 feet in elevation. A network of streams and brooks feed the town's two largest waterways, Mill Brook and the West Branch of the North River. Both the Mill Brook and the West Branch flow south and eventually drain into the Deerfield River, in Charlemont and Shelburne, respectively. Local marshland is limited to several small tracts scattered throughout Heath. The town lacks any bodies of freshwater.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Southern section originally included as part of Boston Township Number 1 in 1735 and incorporated as Charlemont in 1765. Northern district originally surveyed for the Line of Forts in 1741 with boundary at Massachusetts Province line (Vermont). Eastern boundary established with Colrain in 1761 and western line with Myrifiield (Rowe) in 1785. Incorporated as town of Heath in 1785 including southern district from Charlemont.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Rural recreational hill town on Vermont border with access to Mohawk Trail. Located in Hoosac highlands at base of Green Mountains with native sites possible along West Branch in North Heath and conjectured quarries on Mill River to Deerfield valley. Initial settlement as military outpost during French and Indian Wars with Fort Shirley site documented on Hosmer Road overlooking West Branch valley. Colonial farmsteads expanded from Deerfield valley during mid-18th century with original meeting house sites on Charlemont Hill marked by authentic Georgian house on Basset Road and South Road cemetery. Continued expansion of upland agriculture through early 19th century with well preserved Federal houses on Jacksonville Stage Road to North Heath. Civic focus established at Heath Center around town common lined with Greek Revival public buildings. Limited industrial potential along Mill River with period stone dam and housing at Dell Hollow, including broad gable examples. Upland agriculture remained active through early 20th century with dairy farming in North Heath. Present growth evident as recreational suburban housing along Colrain Brook Road and on scenic vistas from Vermont in North Heath. Town

center retains historic integrity around original common with several period farmsteads intact on Charlemont Hill.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Intermediate corridor through Hoosac highlands above Deerfield valley. Primary regional trails apparently east-west routes along West Branch valley following sections of Forth Shiley military road (Costello, 1975, map) and possibly along Davenport Brook as Colrain Road to Heath Brook and Mill River. North-south connections from Deerfield valley likely along Burrington-South Road and sections of Swamp Road around Burnt Hill. Trail pattern to Vermont from West Branch valley possibly followed King Road and Brunelle Road.

B. Settlement Patterns:

None of the available secondary sources or the MHC prehistoric site file made any references to native sites (prehistoric or historic). The area's rugged terrain and absence of major water sources strongly suggests native period occupation was restricted to small hunting and fishing encampments scattered throughout local uplands and intervalles. The most likely locations would have been in the vicinity of the Colrain/Jacksonville Roads (probable primary native trail) particularly on the moderate hill east of the junction of Nine and Stage Roads. A second possible location for period sites in the area adjacent to the town's second probably primary east-west route, the Colrain Brook Road, especially near the village of Heath.

C. Subsistence Patterns:

It is highly unlikely native horticulture was undertaken in Heath. Relatively high quality cropland was available to the south and east in the present towns of Charlemont, Colrain and Greenfield. Some native fishing probably occurred on area waterways, particularly Mill Brook and West Branch. Hunting likely occurred throughout Heath's uplands.

D. Observations:

Heath probably was only inhabited by a small native population on a seasonal basis. This area most likely was utilized as a resource area during the spring and winter months by the Squakeags centrally located in the present town of Northfield. The Squakeags were the northernmost native group that collectively fell under the label of Pocumtuck. Period sites may survive along the West Branch (portion in vicinity of Colrain/Jacksonville/Stage Roads trail, adjacent to the village of Heath and the southern portion of Mill Brook). However, these sites will probably have low archaeological visibility because of their short-term occupation.

V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails remained as regional routes across Hoosac highlands from Deerfield valley.

B. Population:

Small bands of natives probably continued to fish and hunt in Heath. Colonial occupation did not take place until the 1740's.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Native settlement patterns were most likely similar to those described in the Contact period section.

D. Economic Base:

Native subsistence patterns probably remained essentially the same as those suggested for the Contact period. However, there most likely was an increased emphasis on the trapping of fur-bearing animals largely in response to the establishment of Anglo-Indian fur trade in the study unit in the late 1630's.

E. Observations:

It appears Heath remained a native resource area. Colonial exploitation and settlement did not take place until the mid-18th century, because of this area's exposure to native attack and the availability of much more diverse and productive resource base in the Middle Connecticut River Valley.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Improvement of regional highways with construction of Line of Forts (1744). Primary east-west route constructed as Fort Shirley military road along West Branch trail. Location of Charlemont meeting house (1753) on Charlemont Hill required connecting highways from Deerfield valley as Basset, South, Burrington and Avery Road (1765). East-west highways of the period included Colrain Brook Road and possibly Jacksonville Stage Road.

B. Population:

There were no figures for a native period population.

It is unclear what the population of the colonial settlement was. Period settlers were primarily former residents of Lancaster and Leominster. Others moved from Bedford and Charlemont.

C. Settlement Patterns:

The first colonial occupation occurred in c.1744 when Ft. Shirley, part of the line of forts established on Massachusetts northern frontier, was constructed approximately one mile northwest of the Colrain Stage and Hosmer Roads intersection. This defensive structure was manned by a small garrison until c.1754 when it was abandoned. Establishment of a civilian community was not initiated until c.1752 when Colonel Jonathan White built a home on Royer Road slightly north of its junction with South Road. He was followed by Jonathan Taylor who moved from present Charlemont in c.1757 and constructed a dwelling house on Colrain Brook Road a short distance west of its intersection with Hosmer Swamp Road. Later period settlement occurred along the northern portion of Burrington Road and Bassett Road. By the late 1760's, this area was the focal point of Old Charlemont (present Charlemont, Heath). In c.1769, the town's 3rd meeting house (1st to be completed) was erected adjacent to the southern end of Bassett Road. The first two buildings (c.1755, c.1762) may have been located near South Cemetery. This site is not definite since at least one source placed the two uncompleted meeting-houses in Charlemont (Healy 1965:24).

D. Economic Base:

The primary occupation of area settlers was livestock production. The lack of good cropland discouraged emphasis on local crop production. Lumbering was probably an important aspect of Heath's economy. The town was covered with extensive stands of timberland. Secondary sources made no references to industrial operations. Local waterways were not good mill power sources. Heath residents most likely utilized mill facilities situated in Charlemont. At least one area inhabitant regularly journeyed to Deerfield for supplies.

D. Architecture:

Residential: Heath is fortunate to retain four houses dated to the Colonial period. These include three center chimney plan houses and one house with double interior chimneys and a center hall plan; although dated 1773, the center hall house appears to date from the Federal or Early Industrial period. The remaining three houses exhibit standard Georgian vernacular features and all are dated ca.1770. Of note are the White Homestead (ca. 1770) which incorporates an integral leanto and the Reverend Jonathan Leavitt House ("The Manse", 1769), a particularly fine Georgian vernacular house with crown molded windowheads and an entrance surround with pediment. Surviving Georgian houses of the Manse's quality are almost unknown in Franklin County's western highlands.

E. Observations:

Heath was closely tied to present Charlemont largely because of the former settlement's lack of industrial operations and its selection

as the site of "Old Charlemont's" first completed meetinghouse. However, it should be determined why this area developed as the focal point of period settlement in Old Charlemont when considering the present town of Charlemont had superior agricultural land and mill power sources and was situated on a major colonial transportation route (Mohawk Trail). In addition, future research should be devoted to the publication of an updated expanded town history. The current sources dealing with Heath's colonial history are insufficient. Considerable archaeological evidence of period settlement probably survives on Bassett, Royer, Burrington and Colrain Brook roads. This area continues to be lightly developed. Steps should be undertaken to assess the condition of and protect, if possible, the site of Ft. Shirley.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Establishment of Heath Center (1789) required radial highway system from town common with Dell Road to Mill Brook, Hill Road to North Heath and Bray Road to Center Cemetery. North-south division highways included Hosmer, Flagg Hill, Swamp and Royer Road with east-west connectors along Colrain and Jacksonville Stage Road. Radial highways from North Heath included Stetson, Underwood, Brunville and Branch Road with east-west connector along West Branch as Colrain Road.

B. Population:

Heath's population grew with extraordinary speed during the Federal period. Between 1790 and 1830 the town had a growth rate of 216.3% -- the highest rate for those years of any town in the county -- though its development was later than that of the neighboring towns of Colrain, Conway, and Hawley which also had large and rapidly growing populations in this period. The population peaked in 1830 at 1,199, beginning a decline which continued until 1965.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Civic focus relocated from Charlemont Hill to Heath Center (1789) with secondary economic focus along Mill Brook at Dell village (c.1800). Upland agriculture extended to limits of highland plateau along Jacksonville State Road with local settlement at North Heath.

D. Economic Base:

Predominantly agricultural economy with several small saw and grist mills in operation by 1830. At Mill Hollow (now Dell) a grist mill was established soon after 1785, followed by a fulling mill and, by about 1830, by a small woolen mill, though its life appears to have been short. For the most part, cattle, sheep and dairy products predominated.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Approximately a dozen Federal period houses and cottages survive in Heath. These include nearly equal numbers of central chimney and center hall (double interior chimney) plan houses, probably indicating steady growth over the period 1785 to 1820. Houses predominate with fewer cottages than expected for the relatively isolated location. Most of the cottages observed (some half-dozen examples) exhibit center chimney plans. The only cluster of period houses stands at Heath Center; elsewhere, Federal farmhouses are scattered along Jacksonville, Stage and Colrain Roads. Almost all of the houses and cottages are very simply detailed. The most common entrance detail observed consisted of a very wide surround with straight entablature and half or three-quarter length sidelights with a single panelled door. Of note is the width of the surround, given the Federal penchant for narrowness. Entrance width may reflect the strength of the Connecticut Valley tradition for wide doors, which, in fully developed examples, contain double leaf panelled doors.

Institutional: When Heath incorporated in 1785, the first church (organized also in 1785) met in the former Charlemont meetinghouse, which stood in Heath territory. Built in 1769, the Charlemont/Heath meetinghouse was used until 1833. Two schoolhouses were also built in 1785. Other institutional activity included the organization of a Baptist Society in 1801 and of a Unitarian Society in 1825. As the 1830 map indicates three meetinghouses in the town, it is possible that meetinghouses were built by both Baptists and Unitarians prior to 1830. However, only the construction of a Baptist meetinghouse ca.1830 is recorded. The 1830 map also shows that by 1830, six schoolhouses stood in the town. None are known to have survived.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Local highway system remained focused around Heath Center and North Heath with improvement of north-south connecting routes to Charlemont along Mill River as Jacksonville Stage Road (Route 8A) to Dell Hollow and North Heath.

B. Population:

Like the majority of towns in the county, Heath's population declined between 1830 and 1870. In that period the town lost nearly half of its population, though the greatest part of this loss occurred in the single decade 1830-40, when the town lost over 300 residents.

In 1855 the town claimed only two immigrants: a Canadian and an Irishman.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Heath Center remained as civic focus with secondary village at North Heath as center for upland farming district. Local industrial activity expanded at Dell Hollow on Mill River.

D. Economic Base:

Limited expansion of Heath's small woodworking shops in addition to two tanneries in operation for most of the period. By 1865 five sawmills were reported, one grist mill, and a maker of hand rakes. Both Dwight Hitchcock and Henry Fairbanks produced chairstock as well as butterboxes (Hitchcock) and broom handles (Fairbanks).

Considerable wool was sheared and in 1845 Heath led the county in the quantity of cheese produced (62,000 lbs.), though the figure fell in subsequent decades.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Approximately two dozen houses of the Early Industrial period survive in the town. In contrast to the Federal period, when houses predominated, the cottage was the most common house form of the Early Industrial period. Plan types include nearly equal numbers of center chimney and center hall examples. While the Greek Revival style clearly dominates, two cottages with Gothic Revival details were observed at Dell. Concentrations of settlement occur at Dell, at South Heath, at North Heath (all of which appear to have developed largely between 1830 - 1850) and at the town center. For five bay wide, center entrance plan cottages, narrow eyebrow windows became common in the period. Occasionally, four bay wide cottages with a center entrance bay were also built. For the most part, sidehall plan cottages are confined to the village center; these cottages are among the most fully-developed examples of the Greek Revival style, with entrance surrounds incorporating transom and full length side-lights.

Institutional: Most of Heath's surviving institutional buildings date from the period. All are located at Heath Center. Foremost of these is the Heath Union Church (1833), a Greek/Gothic Revival one-and-a-half story building with double entrances, lancet windows and a domed, square belfry. Also of note is the Heath Town Hall (1835), an inventively-detailed one-story Greek/Gothic Revival building with a center entrance and a carved triangular panel in the gable pediment. Colonel David Snow, an important local builder, constructed the Town Hall. Also standing at the center is the Community Hall, probably constructed as the Baptist meetinghouse ca.1830. A two-story, gable front building with a one-stage square belfry, the Community Hall has been altered by the addition of aluminum siding. Institutional activity of the period included the organization of a Methodist Episcopal Church in 1859. Eight schools stood in Heath in 1878.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Local highway system remained focused around Heath Center and North Heath with regional axis along Jacksonville Stage Road to Charlemont

from Vermont. No railroads constructed through the area.

B. Population:

Like the majority of towns in the county, Heath's population continued to decline. Between 1870 and 1915 the town lost 37% of its 1870 population, though slight gains were made in the 1880s and 1910-15. By the latter year, Heath's resident count stood at 383.

In 1905, 17 French Canadians made up the bulk of Heath's immigrant population.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Local civic focus maintained at Heath Center with farm village at North Heath. Gradual decline of economic activity at Dell Hollow mill site.

D. Economic Base:

By 1875, Heath reported three sawmills and one grist mill in operation, giving the town a total value of manufactured products of \$9,630. In 1890 three sawmills were still reported (Chafin, Fairbanks, and Hitchcock). By 1913 the Cold Spring Creamery in North Heath had been established by Isaac Stetson. Maple sugar, cider, and vinegar were also extensively produced.

E. Architecture:

Very few buildings were constructed in the town in the Late Industrial period. Only two period houses were observed in the field. These are a modest two-story Queen Anne house, two bays wide by four long, on Stage Road at North Heath and a small sidehall Queen Anne cottage at Heath Center. At least two schools of the Late Industrial period have survived. The Heath Center School, a one-and-a-half story structure with double entrances, is the earlier, probably built ca.1890. The other, the Branch School, on Stage Road at North Heath, was probably built ca.1910 and incorporates banded windows in a one-story frame, gable roofed structure. Sawyer Hall, the present Town Hall and Post Office, is a two-story vernacular Italianate structure, possibly built as a store ca.1890.

X. EARLY MODERN (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Improvement of local roads as auto highways with primary route from Charlemont as Jacksonville Stage Road (now Route 8A) and Colrain Road from North Heath to Vermont.

B. Population:

Heath's population, though gaining and losing small amounts in the period, remained relatively stagnant between 383 and 298. The net loss for the period was only 24 persons.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Heath Center maintained as local civic focus with secondary settlement at North Heath and Dell Hollow. Upland farming continued as active economy on highlands towards Vermont with some recreational development along West Branch Brook.

D. Economic Base:

No new industry identified. Farming was the chief occupation. Three sawmills were washed out in the hurricane of 1938.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

General: Heath's survey documents most pre-1830 residences and all pre-1850 institutional buildings. While forms are adequately completed for architectural and current planning information, they almost entirely fail to include historical data, including date of construction, original use and original owner. In addition to completion of historical data, future inventory work should include post-1830 residences and institutional buildings. Survey boundaries should be expanded beyond the areas of Dell, North Heath and Heath Center to include houses along outlying roads. Of special note in Heath is the remarkably well-preserved 19th-century agricultural landscape with many farmsteads intact.

XII. SOURCES

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Perry, Arthur Latham, "Fort Shirley," Bay State Monthly 3 (1885), 341-347.