

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

HUBBARDSTON

Report Date: 1984

Associated Regional Report: Central 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.

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MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

DATE: 1984

COMMUNITY: Hubbardston

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Hubbardston, situated in the hill country of central Worcester County, forms a diamond in shape approximately six miles on a side. A number of rivers and brooks drain the town: Burnshirt River and its major tributary, Canesto Brook, drain the western half of the town; the Ware River and its many minor tributaries crisscross the swampy eastern half of the town. These streams provided many small water power sites utilized through the 19th century for saw and grist milling and woodworking.

The Ware River valley also separates two different soil type areas: to the east, Charlton loam predominates; to the west, Brookfield loams are more prevalent. Paxton loam occurs on the tops of drumlins throughout the town. These soils are among the most important agriculturally in the county, yielding large crops of hay, grains, and vegetables.

Elevations in the town range from 800 feet above sea level in the Ware River valley to more than 1,300 feet in the northern part of the town. Most of the town, however, lies between 900 and 1,100 feet above sea level. The mineral copperas was discovered in the northern part of the town during the construction of a road for Templeton in 1828. The ore was mined for several years before operations ceased.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Included in twelve-mile square "Naquag" Indian purchase (1686), established as town of Rutland in 1714. Incorporated as district of Hubbardston, from part of Rutland, 1767. Made a town in 1775. Part annexed to Princeton, 1810.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Upland residential community on the West Branch Ware River corridor, with possible native sites near Asnacomet and Moosehorn ponds in the southeast. First permanent European settlement ca. 1737 as peripheral area of Rutland, with meetinghouse site established by 1772. Late 18th and early 19th century dispersed agricultural settlement occurs, with relatively small-scale mid 19th century growth of chair and boot and shoe industries at Hubbardston Center and Williamsville, followed by small late 19th century textile manufacturing development at Hubbardston Center. Both agricultural and industrial activities decline through the early 20th century. Hubbardston Center and Williamsville retain much of their 19th century character.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes

Highland tributary area with large wetland tracts. Main east-west trail from Wachusett area between Asnacomet and Moosehorn ponds to Burnshirt River crossing (Lampere Road-Hobb Road-Wachusett Rest Road-Worcester Road-Williamsville Road). Several conjectured branches north include: Mile Road west of Burnshirt River, Old Templeton Road (northwest) west of Natty Pond Brook, Gardner Road-Ragged Hill Road north, Depot Road-Old Westminster Road northeast to Cedar Swamp. Southwest branch to Ware River and Rutland conjectured on Barre Road.

B. Settlement Pattern

Like most of the towns located in the north and west of the county, little information exists on this period. The two sites in the town are undescribed, but their location on Asnacomet Pond are likely occupations. Other ponds in the town, including Williamsville on the Burnshirt River in the west, Brigham Pond on the West Branch Ware River, Bents and Waite ponds in the north, and Lovewell, Moosehorn, and Bickford ponds in the east provide a multitude of potential sites. Occupation would be short-term by small family or task groups, within a presumed low density population.

C. Subsistence Pattern

Small family and task groups visited the area for the seasonal exploitation of resources through hunting and fishing.

V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes

Contact period trails continue in use.

B. Settlement Pattern

The focus of both native and colonial to the south, east and west meant that patterns established during the Contact period continued with only secondary influence from these areas.

C. Subsistence Pattern

A continuation of patterns established during the Contact period.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes

Peripheral area of 18th century Rutland settlement, with main native trails improved as roadways. Early route to Rutland meetinghouse possibly southwest on Barre Road. More direct north-south county road from Templeton to Rutland through Hubbardston laid out in 1767 (Old Templeton Road-Williamsville Road-Main Street-Worcester Road).

B. Population

First settler in 1737, but no permanent settlers until 1744. At incorporation as district in 1767, the town included ca. 30 families and 150 individuals. Nine years later, the town's total population equalled 488. Although an attempt was made in 1766, a church was not formed until 1770, by six men.

C. Settlement Pattern

The area now Hubbardston was the northeast quarter of the large grant to Rutland. In 1737, the proprietors of the undivided portion of Rutland opened this area for settlement with the division into lots, 68 of 100 acres for settlers, and 33 great farms of 500 acres for proprietors. The original meetinghouse location was to have been on a hill northeast of the present location of the First Parish Church. An exchange was made with the minister, whose 100-acre lot included the area set out for meetinghouse and burying ground. The first settler, Eleazer Brown, was granted 60 acres that same year to keep a tavern. It was nine years before he was joined by other permanent residents.

D. Economic Base

Although Hubbardston is not reported in the 1771 Valuation, it undoubtedly shared the characteristics of its neighbors as a new upland agricultural community. These poor agrarian towns were low ranking in commerce, wealth, agrarian prosperity, and propertylessness, combined with moderate corn production and high agrarian poverty.

E. Architecture

Residential: Little domestic architecture of the period seems to survive. Permanent settlement began around the mid 18th century. One center chimney, five-bay house and one two-story, five-bay, double chimney house survive. Other dwellings, both one- and two-story, may also be of the period.

Institutional: The first meetinghouse was begun in 1773 and completed in 1794. The original building measured 45 x 45 feet. A porch and belfry were added in 1806. The present mid 19th

century appearance of the building results from two remodellings, in 1842 and 1869. The first schoolhouse was erected ca. 1770 and measured 26 x 20 feet.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes

The colonial roadways continue in use. Additions include the east-west Barre Turnpike (opened 1824) across the southern part of town (Clark Road-Old Boston Turnpike Road) and the northeast road to Gardner from Hubbardston Center.

B. Population

Like so many of the towns in the county's west and north, Hubbardston experienced its greatest growth during the early national period, with agricultural and manufacturing expansion in a newly settled area. From 488 in 1776 the total quadrupled to 1,674 in 1830, with the greatest growth occurring in the first 15 years with 445 added, and during the 1820s when 307 were added.

Not surprisingly, this growth was accompanied by denominational proliferation as alternatives to Congregationalism gained strength. Within the First Parish, ministerial turnover was high, due in part to common payment problems and the familiar disagreements between a Unitarian parish and a Calvinist Church. The first group to withdraw were Baptists in 1812, but no local society was formed. Next, in 1821, 38 formed a Restorationist Universalist Society. In 1826, the minister and his 38 followers withdrew to form a Calvinist Society. The First Parish became avowedly Unitarian, were rejoined by the Universalists, and numbered 30 members.

The town was sympathetic to Shays' Rebellion, and one of its leaders, Capt. Adam Wheeler, was from Hubbardston. In 1825 a short-lived library association was formed. By 1828 an almshouse was located in Williamsville.

C. Settlement Pattern

Growth of the meetinghouse center as a commercial/residential village begins late in the period, with linear development along the north-south Main Street corridor north of the meetinghouse toward the 1827 Calvinist Church on Petersham Road. Outside the center, dispersed agricultural settlement continues to spread.

D. Economic Base

Hubbardston's early economy was based almost exclusively on agriculture and forest industries. A sparsely settled town with only 488 inhabitants in 1776, it had grown to only 1,674 people by 1830, with most of the people still involved in agriculture. An

indication of the economic difficulties encountered by the town's farmers shortly after the Revolutionary War is their significant involvement in Shays' Rebellion. In September 1786, 80 men from Hubbardston under the command of Capt. Adam Wheeler, second in command to Shays, marched on Worcester and were part of a group who took possession of the courthouse to protest the widespread foreclosures and seizures of property by creditors through the courts.

A very high percentage of the town's land in 1784 was unimproved or woodlot, 82.4%, while an additional 12.3% was classed as unimprovable. The small amount of remaining land under cultivation was divided typically with the most devoted to pasturage, 2.9%, and only .57% under tillage. All these figures are low for the county as a whole.

At least 12 sawmills were in operation between the 1790s and 1830s, and during this period the making of potash was an important activity which provided an exportable and marketable product. Mixed husbandry of livestock and grains was the dominant agricultural practice, with meat, wool, hides, butter, and cheese the major animal products, and Indian corn, rye, oats, and barley the major cereals. Hay cultivation and pasture land increased through the period as more land was cleared of forest.

The leading manufacturing enterprise during the early 19th century was the manufacture of palm leaf hats, which was carried out by about 70 women and girls in 1832. Working in their homes with materials supplied by and finished products marketed by merchants in Barre, the women produced 30,000 hats worth \$7,500, most of which were sent to the Southern states for use by farmers and slaves. Two tanners and curriers prepared hides in 1832, for use mostly by two boot and shoe manufactories which employed eight men and produced \$5,500 worth of shoes, also marketed in the Southern states. Two chairmakers manufactured 8,000 chairs in 1832, most of which were sold in Providence, Rhode Island, and a small card manufactory produced \$1,000 worth of wool cards.

The construction of a turnpike in the 1820s between Princeton and Barre and through Hubbardston helped stimulate craft industries and the movement of agricultural goods out of the town and manufactured goods into the town. The mineral copperas, useful in dyeing, tanning, and making of ink, was discovered during road construction in 1828 and mined through the 1830s. In 1832, 100 tons were extracted by ten men; by 1837, only 41 tons were removed, and by 1875, operations had ceased.

E. Architecture

Residential: Center chimney, one-story, five-bay plans (some possibly of Colonial period origin) form a noticeable part of the period dwellings. Two-story, five-bay houses, many of rear wall chimney plan, and frequently with hipped roofs and elegant swagged

doorways, are found in the center. One two-story, five-bay, center chimney plan with quoins was noted in the center as well.

Institutional: The Evangelical Congregational Church was erected on the Petersham Road in 1827. The original structure, a one-story, gable design plan with a four-columned portico, was raised to two stories in 1886 and moved to its present site. In 1784, the town voted to build more schoolhouses.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes

The early 19th century roads continue in use, with the addition of the road from Williamsville north to Templeton along the Burnshirt River corridor.

B. Population

The pattern of growth continued during the first 20 years of this period, expanding from 1,674 in 1830 to 1,825 at 1850. The next 20 years were characterized by fluctuation, dropping to 1,546 in 1865, but up to 1,654 five years later. Although total population was dropping, the number of foreign-born immigrants in the town increased, from 1.9% in 1855 to 7.7% in 1875. Within this group the Irish were most numerous, followed later by Canadians. Agriculture remained the primary employment, numbering twice as many men as manufacturing in 1840, and increasing by only 25%. A Lyceum operated in the town in 1844. A second library association was formed in 1850, followed by a Farmers' Library in 1861. The town sent an anti-slavery representative to the state legislature, and was influenced by the temperance movement. The Unitarian and Calvinist societies remained stable; a Methodist group formed, meeting in the south schoolhouse from 1838 until constructing a meetinghouse the following year, and forming a church in 1846.

C. Settlement Pattern

Significant growth occurs early in the period as the central village becomes a commercial and light industrial (chairs, boots, and shoes) focus. Intensive commercial and residential development occurs on Main Street between the Orthodox and Unitarian churches. A Methodist Church (1840) is also located here. Linear development also extends from this central corridor northeast on Gardner Road, west on Elm Street/Barre Road, and east on Westminster Road. Larger industrial establishments are built on the village periphery (Petersham Road tannery and Templeton Road chair factory). Outside the central village, dispersed upland agriculture continues, and small-scale industrial shops proliferate. The most significant of these secondary clusters is the chair manufacturing village at Williamsville on the Burnshirt River, with worker housing on Templeton Road.

D. Economic Base

Hubbardston's manufacturing sector consisted of small craft shops and home manufacturing through the Civil War; by the 1860s as many as 30 shops and small saw and woodworking mills were in operation. The value of goods produced increased steadily through the period and attained a 19th century peak during the 1860s, when at least \$160,000 worth of goods were manufactured annually. Lumber and woodworking became the leading industry by the 1840s, comprising well over half of the total value of manufactured goods through the end of the century. By the mid 1850s, twelve sawmills cut and marketed more than 2.5 million feet of boards and 4,000 cords of firewood annually with values up to \$40,000. Chairmaking increased steadily, employing 41 men and 50 women in the production of more than 79,000 chairs in 1865 worth \$35,000. Many more women worked in their homes caning chair seats. Other shops manufactured churns; built wagons; made boxes for boots, shoes, and hats; cut card boards; built toy wheelbarrows and sleighs; and produced woodenware.

Leather and animal products were next in importance. One or two small tanneries processed up to 2,000 hides annually through the 1860s and supplied the local boot and shoe industry and a saddle, harness, and trunk maker. Boot and shoe making grew slowly until it peaked during the late 1850s and early 1860s; in 1865 nearly \$70,000 worth of boots (22,300 pairs) were made.

Metalworking consisted of a tinware manufacturer, a maker of air-tight stoves, a machine shop, several blacksmiths, and a shoe tool manufacturer. Most were small shops employing only several men.

A continuing source of employment, particularly for women and girls, was the making of palm leaf hats. As it was most commonly done in the home, it was also probably the least disruptive to agricultural work patterns. Up to 200 women and girls were so employed in any given year between the 1830s and 1850s, producing more than 50,000 hats. Most, along with shoes, were marketed in the Southern states, likely for slave use.

Agricultural practices remained relatively unchanged until the 1860s. Mixed husbandry with livestock-raising and grain and hay cultivation continued, with only slight shifts in emphasis toward larger cattle holdings and small reductions in acreage devoted to grain cultivation. Cheese and butter production totalled nearly 100,000 lbs. annually until the 1860s, when whole milk sales were begun, causing a quick decline in their production. More than half of the town's lands were pastures and hayfields by the 1850s, with less than 4,000 acres wooded. After the 1860s, the quantities of beef, pork, and veal slaughtered annually declined considerably, falling by more than half between 1865 and 1875 alone. This was undoubtedly the result of a decline in prices due to the availability of cheaper western cattle and hogs.

A Farmers' Club was organized in 1860. It provided a Farmers' Library and held annual cattle shows and fairs.

E. Architecture

Residential: By 1839, the center consisted of approximately 50 dwellings. The majority of period houses appear to have been one- and two-story, gable end, side-passage plans, displaying Greek, Italianate, and Second Empire details. Some one-story, five-bay, center chimney and two-story, five-bay, double chimney plans were built during the first half of the period.

Institutional: A Methodist church was erected in 1846, a Greek Revival gable end structure which was enlarged and thoroughly repaired in 1867. The last services were held in the church in 1943; no evidence of the church as such remains.

Commercial: Three hotels operated during the 19th century. Two were in operation in the center by 1839 and Reed's Tavern southeast of the center on the Worcester Road operated until the advent of the railroad. The Star Hotel and the Crystal House were located in the center. The Crystal House burned in 1880. The Star was remodelled in 1889 and reopened as the Falmouth House, a three-story, gable end frame structure with three-story porches.

Industrial: Remains of a chair factory on Old Templeton Road.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes

Rail connections are established through town, with the Boston, Barre and Gardner Railroad (1871) in the east, and the Ware River Railroad (1873), on the Burnshirt River corridor through Williamsville in the west.

B. Population

Like most agricultural towns in the northern and western parts of the county, Hubbardston continued to lose population during this period. The total number of residents in the town fell from 1,654 in 1870 to 1,084 in 1915, the largest drop occurring between 1870 and 1875, with a small recovery in 1890. In spite of the falling population totals, the proportion of foreign-born continued to grow from 7.8% in 1875 to 14.9% in 1915, with only one dip of 1% between 1895 and 1905. Although the Irish were most numerous initially, they were joined by French Canadians, English, and Swedes, with Russian Finns becoming the dominant group in 1915. Agriculture remained a consistent and dominant employer in the town, outnumbering manufacturing by nearly two to one. In 1870, the Library Association was reorganized, merged with the Farmers a year later, and maintained as free and public from 1872. A chapel was located in the village of Williamsville in 1888, beginning as a Sunday School.

C. Settlement Pattern

The most notable period change is the Brigham Pond industrial development southeast of the center village on the Ware River corridor. A textile mill is located at the western pond outlet, with worker housing on Worcester Road, and box factories located on the east and northeast ends of the pond. Limited development occurs in the central village, including a public library (1874) and a few small, stylish residences on Main Street, and some residential infill on the south side of Elm Street. A Union Chapel is built at Williamsville in 1888. Railroad depots are located at Williamsville, and east of the center village on Westminster Road. Abandonment of marginal farmsteads occurs.

D. Economic Base

By the 1870s, the value of agricultural goods exceeded that of manufactured goods. The decline and disappearance of the leather and boot and shoe industries were major contributors to this steady decline in manufacturing. Although employment in the boot factories increased to 60 in 1875, production was lower, and by 1885 the factories, shops, and tanneries had closed. As lumbering diminished also, now that most of the forests were cut over, chairmaking became the principal industry of the town, though much reduced from its pre-Civil War peak. By 1895, it too had ceased, as the total number of shops and manufactories fell by one-half to fourteen between 1875 and 1895. The few remaining manufacturing and craft occupations included a manufactory of soap and candles, a box shop, carriage and wagon shop, several sawmills, tin shops and blacksmiths, and several builders. A small woolen mill was established in 1888 by J. E. McWilliams near Brigham Pond. Formerly in Holden, the Star Blanket Mills moved to Hubbardston when their Holden site was taken for a reservoir and watershed protection.

Dairying increased steadily as the leading agricultural activity and with it acreage in hay and pasture, while grain cultivation continued to decline. As the number and size of dairy farms increased and the number and size of mixed farms fell, marginal lands were allowed to revert to forest, which had increased to more than 9,000 acres by 1900. By 1905, more than 400,000 gallons of whole milk were sold. Orcharding and cultivation of berry fruits such as blueberries and strawberries increased sharply, as did poultry-raising. Market gardening and growing of vegetables also increased.

E. Architecture

Residential: No development of any significance.

Institutional: Williamsville Chapel (1888) is a one-story, gable end Queen Anne period structure with a corner tower. The center school (1872) is now a residence. Originally, the building

displayed late Greek Revival and Italianate influences, being a two-story, seven-bay gabled structure with a cupola centered over a two-bay projecting pavilion.

The Library (1874) is an elegant and well preserved Italianate structure.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes

By the late 1920s, the north-south route through Hubbardston Center from Gardner to Holden is improved as secondary automobile highway Route 68 (Gardner Road-Main Street-Worcester Road). In the early 1930s, a large segment of the old Barre Turnpike across the southern part of town is improved as part of Route 62.

B. Population

The primary characteristic of the town's population during the early 20th century was stasis, varying little from just over 1,000 during these 30 years. The period high of 1,084 was at its start in 1915, falling to 1,000 in 1935. The proportion of foreign-born continued to grow, reaching 19% of the total of 1,022 in 1940. The town's rural population, 55.9%, made it the second highest in that category for the county that same year. No high school was maintained during this period, the town paying state reimbursed tuition to larger, neighboring towns.

C. Settlement Pattern

Little development occurs. By the 1920s, the late 19th century Ware River industrial development is removed as part of the MDC upper Ware River watershed management program. Some recreational camp and cottage development takes place on Asnacomet Pond, and some dispersed, suburban cottage construction occurs in the north as part of Gardner's outer fringe.

D. Economic Base

Hubbardston's economic base between the wars continued to shrink, based almost exclusively on agriculture. Some small woodworking shops and sawmills continued into the period, but they were not important components of the local economy. Dairying was the leading agricultural activity, but orcharding and raising of poultry and hogs were also present.

E. Architecture

Residential: No apparent significant development.

Institutional: Now abandoned, the Finnish Lutheran Congregational Chapel is a modest one-story, gabled building.

Commercial: The Old Hubbardston Inn (formerly the Falmouth House?) burned in 1929.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

Hubbardston's inventory appears to be rather sparse, but covers the center fairly well.

XII. SOURCES