

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

HULL

Report Date: 1979

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

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

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

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

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



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MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

Date: December 1979

Community: Hull

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Located on a long barrier beach and islands formed around glacial out wash features. Extends well into Massachusetts Bay. Several shallow harbors. Sandy/gravelly soil; good agricultural land though limited in space. Only significant elevations are glacial drumlins. Limited fresh water.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Area initially called Nantasket. Established as a plantation, 1641. Incorporated as Town of Hull, 1644.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Recreational suburban seacoast community at outer fringe of Boston Harbor. Set along Atlantic Ocean as barrier beach linking numerous glacial drumlins with link to bedrock highlands at Hingham-Cohasset. Several suspected fishing sites at outer hills and islands from Woodland period. Very early 17th century settlement at Hull with some reported First Period houses. Marginal development of fishing and salvage in 18th and 19th centuries with remaining Colonial village center at Hull. Increasing development of resort economy in 19th century with numerous Victorian period summer homes on hills, some with unique architectural details, although most modest in design. Extensive hotel development, only smaller boarding houses remain as period evidence. Linked by electric railway and autohighway to Boston network for popular urban recreation in early 20th century. Extensive subdivision of Nantasket Beach with minimal period architectural design. Amusement complex at Paragon Park largely rebuilt, although possibly retains some original elements.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500 - 1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Trail system conjectured from mainland (Hingham) to outer fishing ground at Nantasket (Hull Ctr.) along beach. Probable route from Straits Pond over highlands as Hull Street with original location along Nantasket Beach shifting with erosional changes linking with Sagamore, Strawberry, Allerton and Telegraph Hills.

B. Settlement Pattern:

Some documented sites from period. Location preferences include terraces adjacent to leeward beaches and on prominent drumlins. Most sites are small and were probably seasonal food collection camps or for trade with Europeans. Oblique references to native sites on "Skull Head."

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Variety of food resources available: extensive claming flats, fish (tidal traps), waterfowl. Area extensively used on a seasonal basis, especially late summer and fall. Location and ease of access made this a prime area for 16th and early 17th century European trade. Note protohistoric cemetery on Atlantic Hill.

D. Observations:

Should be considerably more sites than current records indicate, especially in vicinity of Strait's Pond and Lyford's Liking, and around the prominent drumlins. Site potential is high, particularly for sites with European contact.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trail from Hull Street along Nantasket Beach to Hull village remains primary link with mainland. Spring and Main Streets through Hull Center apparently of mid-17th century origin. Atlantic Ave. around Straits Pond conjectured for period to Cohasset.

B. Population:

A few inhabitants prior to 1630 - primarily expatriots from Plymouth and Salem. Slow but stable growth after 1640.

C. Settlement:

Major area of settlement in valley "betwixt the two hills next (to) Pedock Island". Church established 1644. Scattered farmsteads along peninsula and in uplands near Lyford's Liking Strait's Pond - Wier River.

D. Economic Base:

A trading post established, 1621 (reputedly by Miles Standish). Community founded as a fishing center, both to catch and preserve by drying or salting. Agriculture and grazing important secondary activities.

E. Observations:

Initially an anchorage for English immigrants and a refuge for social outcasts. Slow development as a fishing community after 1640. Good potential for early 17th century.

VI COLONIAL PERIOD (1676-1776)

A. Transportation Routes:

Basic pattern from Hingham to Hull along Nantasket Beach remains from 17th century.

B. Population:

Despite slow growth, population remains small; 170 people and 31 houses in 1765; 120 inhabitants in 1776.

C. Settlement:

Gradual growth of town center (Spring St. Area) though area limited by geography. Meeting house built, 1734. Conflicting accounts of number of houses: 27 reported 1771, 50 reported 1775. Former is probably more

correct. Telegraph Hill fortified during Revolution.

D. Economic Base:

Fishing for cod/mackerel remained primary occupation. Agriculture an important second. Moderating effect of ocean promoted orchards. Some commerce with Boston and other Massachusetts Bay Towns. Town's maritime's economy badly hurt by blockade of Boston and Revolutionary war in general. Economic disruption caused decline of population in the mid 1770's.

E. Architecture:

Extremely little building during period due to small population; following decline of population, the number of houses in Hull decreased to only 20 in 1790. Survivals from this period are extremely rare; possible houses of this period extant at Hull Village include two gambrel roofed cottages, two Cape Cod cottages and two two-story houses with twin chimneys, all located on Main and Hull Streets. The only public building of this period was a meeting house (demolished) and Fort Independence on Telegraph Hill (now Fort Revere and overgrown). Although some barns existed, none appear to remain.

F. Observations:

A small but fairly prosperous coastal town. Strongly maritime oriented and somewhat reclusive. Post-revolutionary war depression in town raises chances that pre-revolutionary aspects remained intact. Documentary sources for town are poor.

VII FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Colonial highway along beach remains primary link with mainland.

B. Population:

Remained around 120 until 1800-1810 when small increase began; rose to 198 by 1830; Congregational Church closed 1789 and replaced by Methodist Church after 1798.

C. Settlement:

Continued occupation of Hull Village; beginning of resort community with the construction of a hotel at the south end of Nantasket Beach in 1826(Nantasket Avenue near Cohasset town line)

D. Economics:

Continued importance of agriculture, fishing and small scale salt production; resort influence limited to day and overnight visitors to Nantasket Beach.

E. Architecture:

Very little building during period; no obvious examples extant although

several Cape Cod cottages at Hull Village may date from this period; The Sportsman Hotel (1826) reportedly survived until at least 1882 converted to use as a house, may possibly remain in an altered form. No public buildings extant except for parts of light house on Little Brewster Island (1783) and ruins of Revolutionary War fort (Telegraph Hill).

VIII EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highway location along beach from Atlantic Hill remains from early 19th century, with subdivision of major hills as resort. First steamboat pier, 1869.

B. Population:

Slow growth with major increase from 253 to 292 between 1850 and 1855; small foreign-born population made up of Irish, although composition change frequently, suggesting that most foreign born residents were employees of resort hotels.

C. Settlement:

Continued occupation of Hull Village; construction of resort hotels at Hull Village (four by 1857) and at the south end of Nantasket Beach around Atlantic Hill (five by 1857). Summer cottages built south of Hull Village in the vicinity of Spring Street and Mt. Pleasant Terrace; scattered cottages built near Green Hill and Crescent Beach, although Atlantic Avenue not laid out until 1873; grid of lettered streets laid out around Nantasket Avenue (ca 1870) by Nantasket Land Co. although little development until 1870's; development of Strawberry Hill as a resort began after opening of a steamboat dock at its base in 1867.

D. Economy:

Homer noted that in 1848 Hull was sustained almost entirely by fishing, an occupation in which 3/4 of the population was engaged. Yet with growing reliance on the tourist trade, the census reported that by 1865 there were only 12 employed in fishing and 12 in agriculture, while those employed in "occupations" (including the operation of hotels) had increased to 83. Frederick Tudor - a name prominent elsewhere in the commercial ice business - had 5,000 feet of salt evaporation vats in 1848 producing 1500 bushels. By 1855 this manufacture appears to have all but ceased. Until the erection of the Minot's Ledge Lighthouse, (Scituate, 1851; 1860) the scavaging of the frequent wrecks appears to have provided a considerable number with remunerative employment. (Homer).

E. Architecture:

Major building type was the resort hotel of which no major examples remain; most hotels shown in views of Hull and Nantasket post-date 1870 and offer no indication of the appearance of the town's earlier hotels.

A small number of summer cottages were built; most were 1½ stories high with gabled facades and side hall floor plans; decorative trim consisted of machine cut woodwork, little of which remains intact, excepting an excellent Gothic cottage at the corner of Atlantic and Beach Avenues.

The only known public building of the period is a Greek Revival style structure, now used as a fire house (MHC - Hull survey). Commercial and industrial buildings appear to be non-existent.

IX LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Primary highway links remained from mid 19th century with important extension of electric railroad service from Hingham across Wier River to Nantasket Beach, Bayside, Allerton, Hull Ctr. and Pemberton in 1890's, now abandoned with original roadbed intact at Wier River and Pemberton (Main St.). Street railway routes extended from Hingham to Nantasket over Hull St. with extensions along Atlantic Ave. around Straits Pond and along Electric Ave. to Sunset Point wharf in early 1900's.

B. Population:

Increased throughout period with especially rapid growth between 1885 and 1905; foreign born population increased by large numbers after 1895, reached a peak in 1905 and declined slightly by 1915; foreign-born population made up of many groups, the largest of which (Irish) accounted for 20% of the total foreign born population; summer population sufficiently large to support a membership of 500 at Hull Yacht Club in 1884.

C. Settlement:

Nearly all current streets were laid out by 1903, most having been created by land holding companies in the 1880's; by 1903 nearly all of Atlantic Hill, Green Hill and Crescent Beach had been developed, as had been the hill west of Hull Village, the west slope of Allerton Hill and the summit of Sagamore Hill; elsewhere, almost all shore front lots along Beach Avenue, Bay Avenue, and Allerton Hill had been developed; development of Spring Street, the south slope of Allerton Hill, Newport Avenue and interior lots along Nantasket, Samoset and Central Avenues continued rapidly until ca 1925-30 when most lots were occupied.

D. Economic:

Importance of large resort hotels remained dominant until ca 1880-1900 when land development companies began to develop summer cottages on speculation; some of the less expensive hotels and restaurants were closed by the Nantasket Land Company as they were believed to detract from desirability of summer cottages; summer residents continued to be the basis of the local economy.

E. Architecture:

Residential: subdivision of open land into cottage lots resulted in the speculative construction of large number of wood frame cottages after mid-1870's. (In 1870, Hull contained 72 houses, by 1880 it contained 324 and by 1884 it had 501). Architectural styles were fanciful, ranging from "Swiss Cottages" to "Chinese pagodas,...castles...houses with seven gables, and houses with none at all" (King's Guide...). A few houses retain sham lighthouses crenellated towers and cupolas. In general, more substantial architect-designed houses (Queen Anne, Victorian Gothic, neo-Tudor and Bungalow) were built on

hillside sites, while the flats along Nantasket Beach were built up with simple cottages; ocean front lots contained slightly larger houses than did inland lots. Many buildings of the period remain in altered conditions; the least altered houses of the period exist west of Hull Village (including one exceptional Swiss Chalet-Andrew Avenue), Allerton Hill and to a lesser degree on Atlantic Hill. Diverse quality of architecture reflects range of wealth of summer inhabitants from working to upper-middle class.

Commercial: primarily fanciful resort buildings, ranging from architect designed hotels (Second Empire, Victorian, Gothic and Queen Anne styles - mostly demolished) to pavilions of Paragon Park (1905 - demolished) and arcades (demolished). Extant examples of period consist primarily of store fronts.

Institutional: Methodist Church (simple Victorian, Gothic - MHC survey) new town buildings (schools, firehouses and town hall built in early 20th century); MDC bathing pavilions (Nantasket Avenue) built in variation of Spanish Mission style ca 1905-15.

Industrial: No buildings.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Rail and trolley routes abandoned in 1920's. Autohighway extended from Hingham as Washington Blvd (old Rt 128) in 1930's with improvements of shore road to Hull at Allerton on rail bed (Hull Yacht Club) and bridge to Hog Island.

B. Population:

Fluctuation between 1,771 and 2,652 between 1915 and 1940; growth after 1940, largest increases between 1950 and 1965.

C. Settlement:

Building continued on lots laid out prior to 1903.

D. Economic:

Continued resort economy, but of declining importance; suburban commuting to Boston.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Continued building of free standing houses on empty lots, few, if any, architect designed houses after ca 1920. Dominance of bungalows.

Commercial: Little substantial new building; widespread demolition and alteration of existing commercial structures after World War II as other resorts gained popularity over Hull/Nantasket; some strip commercial development on Nantasket Avenue.

Institutional: Some school houses; conversion of Queen Anne style summer house to public library.

Industrial: No buildings.

XI. SOURCES:

King's Handbook of Boston Harbor (1882)

Homer, James, "Notes on the Sea Shore; or Random Sketches" (1848).

Berger, William M., Old Nantasket (1968; 1969)

Lincoln, Solomon, "Sketch of Nantasket, now called Hull," in Hingham Gazette 15 October 1830, p. 789.