

# MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

## LITTLETON

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.

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: March, 1980

COMMUNITY: Littleton

## I. TOPOGRAPHY

Located on rugged, hilly terrain. Some exposed bedrock but glacial outwash features dominate landscape. Generally a gravelly soil. Upland watershed area with several large ponds. Northwest half of town--Spectacle and Forge Ponds plus Beaver Brook--flow into Merrimack via Stony Brook. Southeast half of town--Long, Fort and Nagog Ponds--drain south into Assabet. Sizable areas of upland bog/swamp throughout town.

## II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Established as Indian Praying Town, Nashoba, 1654. Adjacent area to east part of Concord "New Grant," 1655. Incorporated as town of Littleton, 1714 (extinguishing native claim). Eastern section added from Chelmsford, 1725. Several boundary adjustments with neighboring towns during 18th century.

## III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Rural industrial town on outer edge of suburban Boston. Located on periphery of central highlands at headwaters of Merrimack system with several large ponds. Fort Pond contained important native defense site and formed basis for Nashoba Indian Praying town of mid-17th century. Settlement delayed by frontier wars until early 18th century with extended town center along main post road west from Littleton Common. Upland farming economy through Colonial period with apple orchards and dairy cattle. Some surviving landscapes including several 18th century central-chimney houses and unique brick cottages. Boston railroad creates mid-19th century depot village at Littleton center, while Littleton Common expands commercial economy with range of period structures including Victorian wood-frame factory. Early axis of auto routes to upland with some remaining mid-20th century commercial buildings around Littleton center. Recent expansion of suburban development has affected historic landscape around Nagog Pond, but much of the area retains original character especially around Oak Hill and Fort Pond.

## IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

### A. Transportation Routes

Located on periphery of central highlands along headwaters of Concord River. Conjectured trails follow north/west axis to interior around Fort and Nagog Ponds (native sites) to Beaver Brook as Great Road (Routes 2A-119) with likely loop near Nashoba Hill and western branch from Littleton Common to Littleton as King-Bruce Roads with former loops near Tophet Chasm. Secondary branches follow Shaker Lane-Newton Road to Fort Pond with possible link along Tahattawen Road near Long Pond. Likely trail is suspected to follow easterly near Beaver Brook to Whitcomb Avenue and Hartwell Road around Proctor Hill to Gilson Brook.

B. Settlement:

No documented sites reported; however, sites are highly likely on well drained terraces and knolls adjacent to all the major ponds.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Anadromous fish runs would have reached Nagog, Fort and possibly other ponds. Fresh water fishing as well. Limited agriculture as well as upland hunting/gathering.

D. Observations:

Virtually no information available on this area, however, the concentration of ponds plus access to season fish runs make this a high potential area for Nipmuck-related sites.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails serve as highway network in 17th century with routes to Indian Plantation at Fort Pond along Shaker Lane from Great Road.

B. Population:

A small native population--in 1674, ten families or about 50 individuals. A few colonial settlers outside the Praying Town boundaries by end of period.

C. Settlement:

Praying Town established 1654, location is unclear but probably on either the island or adjacent higher ground north or northeast of Fort Pond. A small, struggling community, temporarily abandoned during 1660s. Location of colonial farms also unclear--one apparently near Nashoba Hill, another near "Quagana" Hill.

D. Economic Base:

Subsistence agriculture, hunting and fishing. Orchards and cider production associated with Praying Town. Probably some trapping and fur trade activities as well.

E. Observations:

Rugged and exposed frontier conditions limited both native and colonial settlement.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1676-1776)

A. Transportation Routes:

Location of meetinghouse at Littleton Common during mid-18th century forms radial highway system along existing with additions as Foster/Taylor

Streets to Liberty Square with secondary branch across Beaver Brook as Porter Road with original stone bridge. Bypass as New Estate Road around Littleton by late 18th century. Old Stage Road to Harvard survives near Tophet Chasm around Oak Hill.

B. Population:

Native population deported to Deer Island during King Philip's War, few returned. Small colonial population either killed or driven off. Gradual resettlement from Concord, Chelmsford and Stow afterward but limited by unclear status of land ownership. Rapid growth after incorporation. Census of 1765 listed 773 inhabitants in 143 families and 122 houses. Census of 1776 listed 918 inhabitants.

C. Settlement:

All settlement abandoned during King Philip's War. Vacant native lands resulted in intense competition for access and control by neighboring towns. Much squatting on desirable land during late 17th and early 18th centuries. Settlement along Great Road, north of Fort Road and east of Oak Hill along Beaver Brook (people from Stow). Main locus of development along Great Road and King Street (Littleton Common). Meetinghouse built 1717, rebuilt 1740. Development continued east along King Street during 18th century resulting in an arc of settlement between Littleton (Center) and Littleton Common--no real town center.

D. Economic Base:

Agriculture and grazing, orchards, seasonal lumbering. Apparently period grist and saw mills on Beaver and Gilson Brooks, but no specific information available. Several taverns: Hunt's, 1722 (Littleton Common?); Lawrence's, 1768 on Great Road; John Fox's, 1760, and Capt. Whiting's, 1770 (Littleton Center).

E. Architecture

Residential:

Little high-style likely to have been built; central-chimney two-story house type seems to have been most widespread house plan; only one cottage is known to have existed, that being a central-chimney gambrel roofed structure.

F. Observations:

A prime example of a colonial town built on the dismantling of a native Praying Town. Intense competition and fervor over land acquisition a major factor in why town did not develop in a unified or focused manner.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Colonial highways remain from 18th century. No regional turnpikes constructed through area.

B. Population:

Population fluctuated during period, perhaps reflecting establishment of Boxborough's boundaries, 1783 and 1794; slight permanent increase to 947 by 1830; Baptist Society formed 1822. No foreign-born population known.

C. Settlement Location:

Densest settlement in the vicinity of Littleton Common and at junction of King Street and Tahattawan Road; elsewhere, widely scattered farmsteads.

D. Economic Base:

Agricultural economy in fruits and vegetables. Probably some home shoe-making in addition to a fulling mill and one or two saw and grist mills. Warren Saw and Grist Mill site still in use as saw mill.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Vernacular house plan of preceding period probably remained popular until c. 1800-10; after which rear-wall chimney, two-story houses became the most widely built type, followed by a lesser number of rear-wall chimney cottages and twin-chimney houses. High-style features were generally restricted to late Georgian and Federalist style doorways, although at least one attempt was made to produce high-style architecture, combining a Federalist house plan with late Georgian decorative details, c. 1800-10 (King Street).

Institutional:

Late Georgian style meetinghouse built 1794, brick meetinghouse built for Baptists (1822-23); four school districts declared and four school houses built, 1796; fifth school district created at town center and furnished with a brick school house, 1821. Town poor farm purchased 1825.

Commercial:

No information available.

Industrial:

No information available.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highways remain from early 19th century with focus of routes around Littleton Common. Fitchburg railroad from Boston (1845) along Beaver Brook, with possibility of original depot building at Littleton Center. Secondary route (1848) from Lowell to Ayer around Forge and Spectacle Ponds (ice cutting) near Gilson Brook.

B. Population:

Population fluctuated between a low of 947 in 1830 and a high of 1,063 in 1860. Small foreign-born population present after c. 1845, made up mostly of Irish immigrants. Universalist Society, Unionist Society and Orthodox Congregational Society founded 1830-35. Only Orthodox Congregational Society lasted beyond 1847.

C. Settlement Location:

Same locations as in preceding period, with the addition of small villages at Pimpryville (Bruce Street and Ayer Road) and at the junction of King Street and Bruce Road.

D. Economic Base:

Manufacture of saddles, harnesses and trunks (2 employees) added to vegetable and fruit growing. The apple orchards were said to be some of the finest in the state and cider mills shipped product to Boston.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Little or no high-style present; new construction seems to have been evenly divided between side-hall houses and cottages of Greek Revival and Italianate design. The most ambitious houses of the period seem to have been center-entrance Italianate style houses.

Institutional:

Greek Revival style meetinghouses built in 1841 (Baptist), 1840 (Unionist-burned 1847), 1841 (Orthodox Congregational), 1841 (Unitarian-First Parish). 3 brick school houses built, 1831-32; central grade school built 1867, outlying school houses remodelled 1867-1877.

Commercial:

Two-story gabled facade blocks built at junction of King Street and Bruce Road at junction of King Street and Tahattawan Road and at Littleton Common--mostly simple Italianate in style; one railroad depot built, c. 1865-75, Italianate style.

Industrial:

Several wood-frame factories/shops (two-stories) built, largely astylistic Italianate (?).

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Road and rail system remains from mid-19th century. No streetcar routes through area.

B. Population:

Small, gradual increase in population throughout period. Foreign-born population made up primarily of Irish and English Canadian immigrants; no new religious societies recorded in secondary sources.

C. Settlement Location:

Immediately south of Littleton Common, along King Street west of Littleton Common, and at the north ends of Taylor Street and Harwood Avenue.

D. Economic Base:

Canning factory and cider and vinegar factory both located at Littleton Depot, the latter growing to become the present Very Fine Apple Products plant with several recent additions. At Littleton Common Conant and Houghton established an elastic web factory.

E. Architecture

Residential:

A variety of styles and house plans present. The simplest level of house building consisted of side-hall houses and cottages of Victorian Gothic and Queen Anne styles. More ambitious/high-style examples of Colonial Revival (c. 1895-1915) and eclectic early 20th century styles were built in the vicinity of King Street and Tahattawan Road. Several high-style farmhouses were built including at least one Second Empire (1874-75) and one Queen Anne style (c. 1895).

Institutional:

Baptist meetinghouse altered, 1880; Congregational and First Parish meetinghouse altered 1882. Queen Anne style, wood-frame town hall built 1886; Colonial Revival style library built 1895-96; high school established 1888; grading of schools begun 1888.

Commercial:

Little new construction, mostly same scale and materials as in preceding period, but with Queen Anne style details on at least one block, c. 1890.

Industrial:

Same basic building-type as in the preceding period, occasionally built to 3 or 4 stories; brick construction introduced locally c. 1882, utilitarian in style.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

System remains intact with improvement of local highways as autoroads in 1930s including former Route 2 (2A) through Littleton as King and New Estate Roads and Route 119 as Great Road. Route 2 built as superhighway (1950)

across Beaver Brook and around Oak Hill with original fieldstone bridges at Taylor and Whitcomb Streets.

B. Population:

Rapid increase between 1920 and 1940.

C. Settlement Location:

Same as in preceding period.

D. Economic Base:

Clay deposits near depot tapped by the Unit Brick & Tile Co., later U.S. Brick & Tile. Poultry, dairy, and orchard products remained significant.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Some variety of scale as in preceding period, but most examples were of bungalow, Colonial Revival or eclectic styles.

Institutional:

Construction of Central (?) (Shattuck Street) School, ca. 1930 (Colonial Revival style).

Commercial:

Scattered farmstands built c. 1920-40 (?); little development apparent elsewhere.

Industrial:

Little, if any, development apparent.

XI. SOURCES

Proceedings of the Littleton Historical Society (1896)  
Harwood, Herbert, Littleton, Massachusetts Historical Sketch (1887)