

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

MEDFIELD

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.



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: February 1980

Community: Medfield

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Located on rugged upland watershed area and on adjacent river meadow. Rocky, hilly terrain throughout town, particularly in northeastern corner. Glacial outwash features, somewhat reshaped by river meander in western part of town. Sandy to gravelly soil. Several small upland ponds and streams. Drainage predominantly west into Charles; eastern side of town however drains into Neponset. Extensive meadow/marsh along Charles.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Part of Dedham grant, 1636. Incorporated as Town of Medfield, 1651. Additional lands granted 1649 and 1659; subsequently became towns of Medway (1713) and Millis (1885).

II. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Historic suburban town on important crossing point of Charles River valley to western interior. Critical area of native settlement along river meadows with early English town plantation by mid-17th century, subsequently burned during King Philips War. A few notable First Period houses survive with early 18th century mill sites and structures along highlands. Modest growth during 18th and early 19th centuries with several period houses around original town center. Limited industrial potential during mid-19th century, although regional craft industries such as straw and boots with local railroad connections to Boston. Remained relatively isolated from suburban expansion until mid-20th century with river meadows preserving historic landscape features of early town settlement.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Important crossing point for east-west trails over the Charles River. Documented routes include trail from Dedham-Walpole as Foundary Street around Mt. Nebo (Hillcrest Road) to Main Street with branches to Natick as North Farm Street and to Sherborn as Harding Street. Hospital Road with presumed ford across Charles River (Route 27). Secondary trails appear likely as E/W route from Dover to Millis through Medfield center as Hartford-Main and Bridge Streets (Route 109) with presumed ford across Charles. Conjectured trails include route to Wrentham as South Street with possible branch loop around Stop River -- as Noon Hill-Causeway Streets with ford over Charles River.

B. Settlement Pattern:

A few sites with probable period occupation. Preferred locations include well drained terraces and knolls overlooking Charles River and meadow, areas adjacent to upland ponds and the plain extending east from Danielson Pond and Wheelock school.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Excellent fishing in Charles during seasonal spawning runs. Some

evidence of weirs probably survives. Ample hunting/gathering potential in marsh lands. Good agricultural land especially on upper river terraces. An area capable of supporting a native population.

D. Observations:

Though little is reported, an area with good potential for sites. Significant due to location on boundary between coastal tribes (on Neponset) and inland, fresh water tribes (on upper Charles and inland lakes). Little known about these groups -- how they were related, how they differed. Sites in Medfield would be important in clarifying these questions.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails remain as primary highways with town center roads extended in the mid-17th century as Main. North and South Streets and bridges over Charles River ford sites by 1650's.

B. Population:

About 40 families in 1657. By 1675, 77 land proprietors (heads of family) listed for town. Most settlers from Dedham, some from Dorchester.

C. Settlement:

Cleared land hints at prior native occupation. Village center laid out, 1650 along Vine Brook included cemetery and thirteen house lots (North, South Streets area). Meetinghouse begun 1653, finished 1656. First school built adjacent, 1666. Initially, a compact, planned village with few outlying farms. These increased in number by end of period.

D. Economic Base:

Location chosen primarily for meadow. Both meadow and cropland assigned with house lots. Agriculture and livestock (cattle and pigs) are primary concern. Some milling for local consumption -- mill built on Mill/Mine Brook (near Elm Street), 1652.

E. Observations:

One of the primary expansions west from Dedham. A well organized effort to extend English settlement to the good interior agricultural and grazing areas.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highways intact from mid-17th century, although Charles River bridges burnt during King Philip's War. Road improvement and extension during early 18th century including Main Street as Dedham highway over Mill Brook (Route 109), Taunton highway as High Street (Route 27), North

Street to Dover and numerous interior mill roads as Elm, Philip, Green and Pine Streets, and river bottom roads as Causeway and Grove Streets.

B. Population:

Some decline early in period due to King Philip's War and emigration to other neighboring towns (Medway). Gradual growth during late 17th and early 18th centuries. By 1702, 123 land proprietors listed. Census of 1765 listed 639 inhabitants in 121 families with 113 houses.

C. Settlement:

Much of town destroyed during King Philip's War; most of village center remained intact however. Gradual rebuilding of outlying areas during following decade. Meetinghouse rebuilt 1706. Location caused controversy resulting in division of town in 1713. During 18th century, village expanded along North and South Streets. Three schools built 1760 -- one in village center, one at South and High Streets (for southern part of town), one at North Street and Hospital Road (for northern part). Farmsteads located throughout the town.

D. Economic Base:

Agriculture and cattle raising remained dominant. Some dairying and orchards. Milling primarily for local use: sawmills on Mill Brook (near Castle Hill and McField Junction), grist and sawmill on Mill/Mine Brook at Jewell's Pond, grist and sawmill at Kingsbury Pond (1702). No taverns.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Little high style likely; most wide-spread vernacular house type appears to have been central-chimney, two-storey type followed by a slightly smaller number of twin-chimney two-storey houses; one-storey Cape Cod cottages are rare. Gambrel roofs present but rare, traditional dates of ca. 1726-60s assigned.

Institutional: Second meetinghouse built 1706; schoolhouses present throughout period, underwent re-building in 1760 by which time there were probably three; powder house built immediately before Revolution; Baptist meetinghouse built 1771-72. Tradition of "noon houses" on Church Common, reportedly were simple frame structures with fireplaces, used between sermons on Sundays.

Commercial: Taverns are probably the only specialized commercial buildings of period; at least one reputed to pre-date 1770.

Industrial: Saw and grist mills only.

F. Observations:

Gradual evolution from a front line frontier community to a moderately prosperous rural town. Little development outside of agriculture and grazing.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1820)

A. Transportation Routes:

Colonial highways remain in place. Main Street improved as turn-pike from Dedham with Hartford Street and causeway over Charles in early 19th century (Route 109).

B. Population:

Fluctuates in 700-800 range throughout period; second Congregational Society formed, 1828.

C. Settlement Location:

Small cluster developed along Main and North Streets although no dense village existed.

D. Economic Base:

Cottage industries in both strawbraid and bonnet manufacture and in boot-and-shoe making. Brush making begun in 1808 by Artemas Woodward, continuing through at least 1845.

E. Architecture:

Residential: No high style likely; vernacular house plans of preceding period remained popular with the addition of rear-wall chimney and end wall chimney two-storey plans, also present are a moderate number of 1½ storey central chimney cottages (ca. 1810-40); Federalist style decoration present consists of door surrounds.

Institutional: Third meetinghouse built 1789, Baptist meetinghouse remodelled 1822, second Congregational Society meetinghouse built 1832, all primarily Federalist in plan and detail, except 1832 meetinghouse which contained many Gothic elements. Three school districts established 1800, brick school house built in North District, 1803; wood frame school houses built in central and south districts, 1803 and 1810; Center school house enlarged by second storey addition of a hall, 1811, for Academy.

Commercial: Tradition of one-storey, gable-faced stores in vicinity of Main and Pleasant Streets, buildings of this type constructed 1795, 1818 and 1819.

Industrial: Little building except for one-storey work shops and small wood-frame factories for manufacture of brushes.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highway remain in place from mid-19th century with secondary rail-roads junction across river, Dover to Medway along Mill Brook (1861) and Walpole to Sherborn through town center (1870).

B. Population:

Gradual growth throughout most of period; relatively small foreign-born population, made up primarily of Irish immigrants; no new religious societies formed.

C. Settlement Location:

New building confined mainly to town center along transportation routes (Main, South, North and Pleasant Streets).

D. Economic Base:

The first straw shop built 1845 by William Chenery, becoming branch of Foxborough straw works. Walter Janes and D. D. Curtis associated in 1858 for manufacture of straw goods (would later build Excelsior Shaw Works). Shoe factory established 1851 not a financial success. Cottage shoemaking disappeared. Large carriage factory built by 1835.

E. Architecture:

Residential: No solid districts of single style or house-type exist; high style restricted to individual examples of Italianate and Second Empire styles, no Greek Revival high style present; side-hall plan houses and cottages present in Greek Revival and Italianate styles, nearly no modest Second Empire style architecture.

Institutional: Unitarian meetinghouse (First Congregation) remodelled, 1839; Baptist Church built 1838, both buildings were Greek Revival style; new school houses built 1849 and 1855, multiple-room school house built in Center District 1859; Firehouse built 1834, replaced 1854.

Commercial: No information recorded in existing sources; probable that one and two-storey wood-frame buildings were dominant type; railroad depots built at town center and at Medfield Junction.

Industrial: Most factories of wood-frame construction between two and four stories with decorative details consisting mainly of brackets; one stone factory built, 1856, for agricultural tools.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Roads and railroads in place with street car route from Dedham to Medway along Main Street (Route 109) in 1890s.

B. Population:

Growth throughout most of period; rapid population increase after 1895 probably included the population of Medfield State Hospital; foreign born population increased rapidly after 1895, Irish formed largest group; Catholic Parish formed by 1892.

C. Settlement Location:

Some expansion onto side streets at town center; large-scale development of hospital property on Hospital Road.

D. Economic Base:

The two straw works in town in 1875 produced over five times the product value of all other industries recorded in the state census of that year. One was the straw works of D. D. Curtis, whose factory, a year later after rebuilding, produced goods valued at over \$1 million (Hurd) (MHC Survey, #10). The only other new factory (1873) manufactured bonnet and telegraph wire.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Several scattered examples of high style Queen Anne at town center; most buildings of period were cottages or side-hall plan two-storey houses with little decorative detail; Bungalows were built toward the end of the period, both at the town center and on roads near the State Hospital.

Institutional: Baptist Church altered, 1874; Second Congregational Church built 1876-77, both Victorian Gothic style; Catholic Church built 1892; brick Victorian Gothic style town hall built 1872, rebuilt 1874; school districts abolished, 1869, central schools built at town center. Major development of State Mental Hospital in 1890s included a large quadrangle of brick hospital buildings, chapel and offices (all late Victorian Gothic style) as well as Queen Anne style, frame attendants' houses; subsequent new buildings in Colonial Revival and Beaux Arts style (ca. 1910).

Commercial: Several two and three storey wood-frame, Queen Anne style commercial blocks built at town center.

Industrial: Wood-frame factories built, of same basic type as preceding period.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Abandonment of trolley line and improvement of existing roads as auto highways, E/W as Route 109 and N/S as Route 27 (rebuilt with new location 1960s).

B. Population:

Gradual, small increases in population throughout the period.

C. Settlement Location:

Small amount of building at town center and in vicinity of State Hospital.

D. Economic Base:

Excelsior Straw Works, under various names, remained in operation until 1952, an unusual example of longevity in any industry whose major components disappeared around 1900. Probably some influence of State Hospital as important employer.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Bungalows seem to be the most widespread house-type of period, in all locations; several small country estates seem to have been assembled in scattered rural locations, generally restoring an existing pre-1830 farm house for estate's main house.

Institutional: New construction probably limited to school buildings and expansion of state hospital; Colonial Revival style library built 1917.

Commercial: Little new construction; primarily adaptation of existing structures to commercial use.

Industrial: Little or no new construction.

XI.

SOURCES

Tilden, William S., History of Medfield (1887).