

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

MILLVILLE

Report Date: 1983

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.

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 RECONAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

DATE: 1983

COMMUNITY: Millville

I. TOPOGRAPHY

The town of Millville occupies a narrow rectangular strip of land in the southeast corner of Worcester County, measuring 1.5 miles from east to west and 3.5 miles from north to south. Passing through the southern 1/3 of the town is the Blackstone River, where a prosperous manufacturing village was built at the falls in the early 19th century. To the south the narrow valley rises approximately 80 feet to a gently sloping plain approximately 300 feet above sea level (asl). To the north the terrain is broken by several ridges and ledge outcrops which parallel the river valley and rise to more than 400 feet above sea level.

The dominant soil type is Gloucester stony fine sandy loam with some areas of Gloucester fine sandy loam, predominately on the plain to the south of the river valley. These glacially formed and deposited soils, similar except for the greater stony content of the former type, are well suited to cultivation, particularly hay and grains, as well as for orchards and market gardens.

Several small streams flow through the town. Fox Brook, in the central area of the town, flows east into the Blackstone, where it joins the Blackstone River. Two smaller streams flow into the Blackstone River from the north and south just east of the former mill sites. One small pond is located in the central portion of the town.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Part of original Mendon Grant, 1667, Established as part of south parish 1769. Part of town of Blackstone, incorporated 1845. Incorporated as a town, from part of Blackstone, 1916.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

A small suburban-industrial community set in the Blackstone Valley and extending into the highlands to the north. A peripheral area of Mendon, and later Blackstone, with earliest European settlement probably ca. 1700 in the northern highlands. Dispersed 18th century agricultural settlement, with surviving south parish meetinghouse established at Chestnut Hill, 1769. Industrial growth in Blackstone Valley after 1809, with early scythe and axe manufacturing, and textile production after 1815. Growth sustained with establishment of Blackstone Valley as regional canal-railroad transportation corridor. Late 19th century industrial resurgence with Lawrence Felting and Woonsocket Rubber. While empty fragn evidence of industry remains, much of the 19th century residential/institutional structure of Millville Village is intact.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes

North side of Blackstone Valley. Conjectured trail north of river on Lincoln Street, Albee Street.

B. Settlement Patterns

The area now Millville served as an area for seasonal hunting and gathering from the larger base camp located to the west, now in Uxbridge. In fact, the density of sites located there along the Rt. 146 survey, west of the Blackstone suggests that this area, to the east, should be similarly rich in sites. Upland areas to the northeast would be used less intensively. It is not clear how proximity to the Narragansett "border" may have affected density and use.

C. Subsistence Patterns

Fishing, particularly anadromous runs in the Blackstone, of particular importance. Some agriculture on terraces, hunting in the northern uplands.

D. Observations

The density of sites located during the Rt. 146 survey in Uxbridge, etc. to the west suggests a frequency of sites in this area far greater than has been predicted in the literature for this inland area.

V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes

Contact period routes remain in use.

B. Settlement Patterns

The area now Millville was the south central portion of the 8 mile square Mendon Grant. No permanent settlement by colonials during this period. Some of the native population may have become part of the Christian community located to the west in what is now Uxbridge, Waeuntug.

C. Subsistence Patterns

Probable use by colonials as outlying fields, meadows, and pasture.

IV. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes

Peripheral settlement of Mendon, with route to center (Chestnut

Street). Chestnut Hill meetinghouse (1769) becomes focus of connecting paths to east (Thayer Road, Hill Street, Providence Road, south of River) becomes important through highway.

B. Population

Few figures available because part of Mendon. South parish located its meetinghouse here, but difficulties maintaining a preacher arose immediately. Balch left after six years due to difficulties over payment. Large numbers of dissenters, Quakers, and Baptists in the area, may have contributed to difficulty providing a living.

C. Settlement Patterns

While most colonials of Mendon clustered in the north part of the town, by 1722 enough had gathered in the south so that school teaching was required in Millville. By 1766 Millville and Blackstone to the east received semi-independent status as Third or South Parish, Mendon. The meetinghouse was located at Chestnut Hill, in the north central portion of Millville, west of the parish's geographic center.

D. Economic Base

Agriculture provides primary employment with good but rocky soil. Grist mill on the Blackstone by 1712, followed by a sawmill in 1753. As part of Mendon, characterized as an Egalitarian Farm community.

E. Architecture

Little architectural development observed from Colonial period. Of special note, however, is the 1769 Chestnut Hill meetinghouse, a two-story structure with the principal entrance centered on the southwest five-bay facade. The door is framed by pilasters with rusticated bases supporting a full entablature and pediment. The northeast entrance has a similar pedimented door. The northeast and southwest gable ends are four bays wide. All windows have caps splayed to resemble jack arches on a masonry building. On the interior, the pews and pulpit are cedar grained.

Also noted was a one-story, three-bay, 18th century "half house" on Legg Street in the northern section of Millville. Additions have been made to the west gable end.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes

Colonial road network remains in use. Blackstone Canal opened 1828, with locks south of river, east of Central Street.

B. Population

Still little information since a part of Mendon. With factories at village of Millville on the Blackstone River, manufacturing portion of population increases. At Congregational Meetinghouse, a minister was shared with First Mendon between 1805-12, the last appointed.

C. Settlement Patterns

Continued dispersed agricultural settlement in north, with some clustering near Chestnut Hill Meetinghouse, though church is disbanded by 1830. Industrial focus at Millville village after 1809, with miscellaneous manufactory, including scythe and axe production. Woolen mills built 1814, 1825. Millville Hotel built 1822. Most period development appears to have taken place south of river.

D. Economic Base

The falls at the village of Millville, still a part of Mendon, were the focus of early commercial and industrial activity in the area. In the late 18th century a fulling mill was added to an existing saw and grist mill, built in 1732 on the island in the river. These mills served a predominantly agricultural population which raised hay, livestock, and grains. The area was brought into the commercial sphere of Providence merchants by the 4th quarter of the 18th century. Led by John Brown, Providence merchants expanded their wholesale and retail trade up the Blackstone Valley and into the interior. They either established stores or provided imported and manufactured goods to storekeepers in exchange for agricultural products, livestock, meat, potash, and lumber.

In the second decade of the 19th century, manufacturing was introduced at the falls. A woolen mill, the first on the Blackstone River, was built in 1814 and during the same period a scythe manufactory was established, where axes and scythes were forged. In 1825, a stone mill for the manufacture of woolen cloth was added by Collins Capron.

A large boost to Millville's importance was the completion of the Blackstone Canal in 1828 between Worcester and Providence. A set of locks were located at the falls on the southwest side of the river, and still survive largely intact. The canal facilitated the movement of agricultural and manufactured goods and greatly lessened the cost of transport to mill owners, who were enabled to easily bring in raw materials and ship out finished products. Canal costs were 6¢/ton/mile as opposed to \$25/ton/mile over land. The canal also added commercial importance to the village as a minor collection and distribution center of goods between Uxbridge and Blackstone.

In 1830 the following mills were clustered around the falls: a cornmill, sawmill, two woolen mills, and a scythe manufactory.

E. Architecture

Development continues to appear minimal. One-story, center chimney dwellings, three five-bay and one four-bay examples, which appear to be late 18th century-early 19th century, survive. A five-bay, single story, center chimney dwelling with brick-end walls was noted in the town center as was a two-story, five-bay, double-chimney, double-pile house on Chestnut Street south of the Chestnut Hill Meetinghouse.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes

Railroad development through Blackstone Valley corridor, with Providence and Worcester Railroad (1847) and Norfolk County Railroad (later Boston, Hartford and Erie, 1849, with western connections to New York 1854).

B. Population

Still no information because part of Mendon until 1845, thereafter part of new town of Blackstone. Population expands with industrialization. At the village of Millville religious societies form to serve the people there. In 1833, a Methodist Reformed Society, which deemphasized the power of bishops, was formed, followed by a Methodist Episcopal in 1850. The year before, a Protestant Episcopal Church, St. John's, was formed.

C. Settlement Pattern

Significant growth and development of Millville Village, particularly after rail connections in 1840s. Woolen mill construction 1835, 1845. Methodist Reform Church (1833), Saint John's Protestant Episcopal Church (1881) locate south of river on Central Street. Presbyterian Orthodox Church (1838) nearby. Commercial focus north of river at Main Street/Central Street intersection. Worker cottage concentration south of river. High income focus further south at Quaker Road/Central Street intersection.

D. Economic Base

Manufacturing in the village of Millville expanded during the next two decades; the Island Mill was erected in 1835, and a new brick mill was built by Welcome Farnum shortly after he purchased all the textile mills in 1845. The production of fine satinetts, broadcloths, and cassimeres was continued by the new owner. Farnum and his bother Darius had developed three successful woolen mills in the village of Waterford, down stream at the Rhode Island border, between 1825 and 1835, as well as one operating mill in South Uxbridge and Woonsocket, R.I. The depression during the 1850s proved too much for Farnum, as he failed, and the mills passed to new owners.

Commercial: A hotel pre-dating 1857 formerly stood on Main Street one block south of the railroad. A two-story Greek Revival store with flushboard facade and quoins was observed.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes

By early 1800s, streetcar service is established on Main Street from Woonsocket/Blackstone to Northbridge/Worcester.

B. Population

Still few figures available since part of Blackstone, but village numbered 2,516, 807 families, in 1895, or 44% of the town of Blackstone's population. After 1880, the Roman Catholic population was served by St. Augustine's church. In 1892, a Lutheran church was formed.

C. Settlement Pattern

Continued growth and expansion of Millville Village, particularly after construction of Woonsocket Rubber Factory (1882) and Lawrence Felting (1897), St. Augustine Catholic Church built on North side of River on Lincoln Street (1880). St. Mark's Lutheran Church (1892) built in existing religious cluster on Central Street, Methodist Episcopal Church moves southeast to Hanney Street. Multifamily worker housing built north of river (Walnut Street, Fletcher Avenue, Preston Street, Main Street), and south (Prospect Street, Hope Street, Hill Street area).

D. Economic Base

In the 1870s, Millville experienced another period of economic growth and expansion. The steampowered Mansfield Scythe Factory was built off Central Street along the railroad tracks in 1871, but in 1877 it was converted to a woolen mill. Oriental Worsted Mills operated four sets of machinery in the production of worsted and cassimeres. A minor setback was the burning of the 1825 stone mill in 1874. A committee was appointed in 1877 to secure additional manufacturing enterprises for Millville, and they soon succeeded in attracting two large companies to replace the ailing textile firms. Woonsocket Rubber Co. and Lawrence Felting Co. purchased the Millville water privilege, and set about building new factories. Lawrence Fleting Co. erected a large brick factory building on the east bank of the river in 1878 and in 1882, the Woonsocket Rubber Co. erected a large factory after obtaining a three-year tax abatement from the town.

A long, very violent strike among the rubber workers at the plants shattered the renewed hopes for prosperity. Scabs were brought in by the owners and Worcester City Police were called into ensure their safety from the angry strikers. The strike lasted several months before work resumed.

In 1893, Woonsocket Rubber Co. and Lawrence Felting joined U.S. Rubber, a large corporation.

A dull period in trade followed, as more than 1,200 operatives at the plants were laid off for periods of up to six months during 1894-1897.

Most of the small shoe shops and blacksmiths disappeared during the period, as did the distillery, tailor's shop and carpenters' shops present at the opening of the period. By 1900, the Oriental Mills were no longer in operation, and textile manufacturing had ceased, replaced by the manufacture of rubber goods and wool and felt boot linings.

E. Architecture

Residential: Very little significant residential growth observed. Side-passage plans and a few mid-east Queen Anne and Colonial Revival residences were noted in the town center. Two asymmetrical two-story dwellings are located along Route 122 and the railroad. Standard two-story, gabled structures survive.

Institutional: St. Augustine's Roman Catholic Church (1881) is a one-and-a-half story three-bay gable end structure with a central square tower containing a pedimented entry. St. Mark's Lutheran Church, now Methodist, was erected in 1892 and is a simple Gothic frame building with a central entrance tower. The Town Hall is a three-story, gable end structure with two oriel windows.

Industrial: The Lawrence Felting Company mill formerly stood on the Blackstone River and was a three-story, broad gable-roofed building having a side tower with a mansard roof. A two-story hipped roof, center chimney structure (now a dwelling) with bracketed eaves and battered walls stands beside the railroad along Route 122 in the center.

X. Early Modern Period (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes

Streetcar line abandoned by 1920s. Main Street is improved as major highway from Worcester (Northbridge to Woonsocket/Providence (Route 122)).

B. Population

Millville's population was 2,224 in 1920, the first report year after incorporation, and grew to 2,366 in 1925. Thereafter, the effects of the Depression and bankrupting of the major employer can be seen in a drop to 1,722 by 1948. The town was run by a Municipal Finance Commission through 1945. Early in the period the town's Poles and Lithuanians formed a society in 1916. The town's foreign-born population equalled 19% at period's end. Only 4.6% of the population was categorized as rural at that time.

C. Settlement Pattern

Little development, with some institutional construction: Temperance Hall (1916), Town Hall (date?), Polish Hall (1923).

D. Economic Base

The 20th century saw the demise of all industry in Millville following the Crash of 1929. Prior to the Depression of the 1930s, 2,000 were employed 150, boosted by a war needs and the following prosperity. In 1920, the Lamb Knitting Co. was incorporated with a capital of \$25,000 and engaged in the manufacture of woolen, worsted, and lightweight knitted fabrics.

The collapse of 1929 caused serious problems for the companies and the town. As the town government refused to grant lower valuation for taxes, the two rubber companies, largest taxpayers in the town, sought an abatement from the Mass. Board of Tax Appeals, which was granted. The town, unable to pay the abatement and raise taxes, could not even borrow money. In 1933 the state established a municipal finance commission for the town of Millville, which remained in force until 1944, when Millville once again won the right to conduct town affairs.

E. Architecture

Little evidence of significant growth or development. Two bungalows, a Four Square house, and a 1925 store (in the center) were noted.