

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

MARION

Report Date: 1981

Associated Regional Report: Southeast 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: June 1981

Community: Marion

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Marion is a costal town on Buzzard's Bay. The town has an extensive coastline along Great and Charles Necks. The soils are generally sandy. Topographic relief is moderate through the town with the exception of Great Hill in the east. Some swamp and bog lands in the western and nothern portion of the town.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

The town of Marion was incorporated from the fourth precinct of Rochester in May of 1852. Prior to incorporation the town was known as Sippican.

III. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Marion is a scenic resort community along the Buzzard's Bay shore. Contact Period native settlement was seasonal along the coastline. Extensive European settlement did not occur until early in the colonial period, expansion of European settlement impacted native settlement patterns. Late 18th and early 19th century settlement nodes at the Old Landing, the Lower Village and at Happy Alley (intersection of Rochester and County Roads). The principle economic base centered on the Salt Works in Sippican Lower Village and along the Weweantic River and the shipyards in Sippican Harbor as well as the whaling industry. Some farming occurred in the northern portion of the town. There was some seperation of population along income lines with ship captains residences at the Old Landing and along Rochester Road and sailors and working men at the Lower Village. The mid-19th century saw the end of whaling prior to the Civil War. First summer visitors in the 1860's with the opening of the Marion House on Great Hill and Bay View House in the Lower Village. Shift of wealth from the Old Landing to the Lower Village accomplished via the intervention of one individual (Elizabeth Taber) who was responsible for almost all of the civic improvements in the town during the latter half of the 19th century. The other factor contributing to this movement was the popularization of the town as a summer resort by the Grover Clevelands and a literary group dominated by Richard Gilder (editor of Century Magazine), Henry James and later Richard Harding Davis and Dana Gibson. Late 19th century and early 20th century development occurred on Great Neck, at Convers Point and in the Lower Village along Water Street. Economic base during the latter half of the 19th and during the 20th century dependent on the areas reputation as a summer resort and some cranberry production and farming in the north. There has been some post World War II suburban infill and conversion of summer residences but a good portion of the summer homes are closed during the winter when the main source of income for the Lower Village appears to be the Taber Academy.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Coastal corridor on Buzzards Bay with inland connections between Sippican fishing necks and Assampsett Pond (Middleborough). Primary trails documented as north/south routes from Sippican Harbor to inland ponds as Front St-Rochester Rd from Marion with alternate trail around Bear Swamp as Converse Rd extension (now abandoned) along Benson Brook (Leonard, 1907, pp. 98-100 -

Delano). Trail to Sippican Neck and Great Hill followed Point/Rds to Planting Island causeway at low tide. Primary route along coast from Plymouth Bay to Mattapoisett appears as portions of County Road across Sippican River ford and south along axis of Front-Mill Sts (Route 6) to Aucoot Cove with alternate inland trail apparently preserved near Sippican Bog.

B. Settlement Patterns:

No reported contact period sites. Two probable contact and/or historical period sites immediately northeast of Wareham and Creek Rd junction and adjacent to Witch's Rock, respectively. Early settlers described these areas as the site of abandoned native planting grounds. Probable native settlement along Marion coast, particularly Sippican Harbor, due to proximity to diverse resource base, sheltered harbor and potential planting grounds. Great Hill's excellent coastal location and the unobstructed view of surrounding territory provided by the hill suggest its use during the contact period.

C. Subsistence Patterns:

Area offered native population a diverse resource base. The Marion coast and freshwater streams offered varied sources of fish, shellfish and water fowl. The interior woodlands and marshlands were the habitats of wild game and timber probably sought by the natives. Potential planting grounds situated along shore of Sippican Harbor, Planting Island and Little Neck. The well protected harbor and coves likely encouraged European exploration and subsequent European-Indian contact/trade.

D. Observations:

Environmental diversity of Marion area likely attracted a substantial contact period native population. Native occupation probably heaviest during late spring and summer months when Marion's inland and coastal resources were sought. Retreated further inland during the cooler fall and winter months. However, as European-Indian trade increased there was probably a greater tendency toward longer periods of native coastal settlement. Probable local affiliation with native population concentrated around Middleboro Ponds. Regionally tied to the Pokanokets (Wampanoags). Present community's lack of development indicates a good probability of extant native contact period sites, particularly on portions of Sippican Harbor and Great Hill.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails improved as regional highways with main path between Sippican Harbor and Middleborough along Rochester Rd, and path to Plymouth from Sippican River as County Road connecting to Great Hill on Point Rd (Leonard, 1907, pp. 98-100).

B. Population:

No native or white population figures. Remaining native population probably substantially diminished by early 17C New England epidemics. White settlement, as with remainder of "Old Rochester", limited to a handful of individuals and families hired to tend Plymouth livestock utilizing area's grazing lands.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Minimal change in native settlement areas due to small degrees of white settlement. White occupants probably scattered about meadowlands adjacent to the coast. Doubtful they occupied the area year round since there were no civic, religious, industrial etc. facilities in the immediate vicinity. As a result, likely that they spent the remainder of the year in Plymouth.

D. Economic Base:

Native maintenance of traditional seasonal subsistence rounds although expanding European-Indian trade contacts undoubtedly resulted in growing native dependence on European for some subsistence items (e.g., firearms, foodstuffs). White residents engaged primarily in husbandry. Limited crop production, hunting, fishing and collecting in area's woodlands, marshlands, streams and coast were their main means of food procurements. Probably some trade with natives.

E. Observations:

White settlement was generally transitory with the area lacking a discreet white community. Minimal Anglo-Indian conflict due to the small white population. Period, however, poorly understood largely because of the lack of readily available secondary primary sources. Close examination of primary sources dealing with Middleboro, Plymouth and Rochester may better clarify this period.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Road system remains from 17th century with primary links between Sippican Harbor (Old Landing) and Rochester Center along Front St-Rochester Rd (Route 105) and Converse Rd extension around Bear Swamp (Leonard/1907, map). Coastal highways apparently improved from Sippican Harbor to Mattapoisett along Mill St (Route 6) and alternate inland road near Sippican Bog.

B. Population:

No native population figures. Native occupation throughout the late 17C and 18C. White population figures confined to those for "Old Rochester" which included present Marion. "Old Rochester" had a population of 60 families in 1683. This portion of Old Rochester was the residence of a number of Quakers probably first settling here at the turn of the 17C.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Expanding white population resulted in displacement of native populace, particularly within Sippican Harbor and area adjacent to Rt. 105 and Pt. Rd Great Hill reputed site in which Benjamin Church met and received a promise of military support from Awashonks during King Philip's War. Initial

post-war white settlement occurred in the 1680's on Little Neck. The first meetinghouse (for all of Old Rochester) was reputedly erected in 1683 near Minister's Rock (slightly south of the junction of Wareham Rd and Hermitage Rd). A shift in population toward present Rochester during the 1680's and 1690's resulted in the structure being replaced by a meetinghouse built in the center of Rochester c.1699. A small Quaker community was established in the vicinity of the junction of Rochester and Point Rds (site of the settlement's early 18C. meetinghouse). The community persisted throughout the 18C although dwindling in size after c.1740. Early-mid 18C settlement occurred along Front/Spring St and Point Rd in conjunction with development of the shipping and fishing facilities on the shores of Sippican Harbor.

D. Economic Base:

Limited native access to coastal resources (Sippican Harbor) and interior planting grounds due to expanding white settlement and development of marine facilities in these areas. Increased native adoption of sedentary lifestyle, some natives seek employment with English as laborers, servants and whalers etc. Growing dependence on English for subsistence items. Pigwacket Indians relocated in Marion in mid-18C supplied with "a boat, tools, provisions and other necessities" provided by the Massachusetts government (Leonard 1907: 18). English community economy focused primarily on agriculture and marine related activities. Probable development of commercial crop and livestock production. Extensive crop production, however, hampered by general rocky nature of area's soil. Commercial fishing probably initiated shortly after first postwar settlement. First evidence of whaling occurred in the 1730's. Some farmers sought seasonal employment with local whalers. Whaling heyday not until the late 18C and early 19C. Although there was no documentation of shipyards the presence of a well sheltered harbor likely encouraged establishment of a formal shipbuilding industry in Sippican Harbor by the 1st half of the 18C. Vessel size, however, would have been limited due to shallowness of harbor (maximum 18'). Local products (i.e., fish, timber, tar, salt turpentine, crops and livestock) probably shipped to Massachusetts Bay communities, the southern colonies and Great Britain. Old Rochester town landing constructed c.1697 on the shore at the foot of Ryder Lane. 18C salt production (evaporation) on the shores of Buzzard's Bay. Many local farmers engaged in seasonal lumbering and tar and turpentine production.

Two possible pre-1775 sawmills adjacent to junction of County Rd and Sippican River (1794 Rochester map). Possibly additional mill site(s) adjacent to Mill St (Benson Brook, Aucoot Creek). Virtual lack of pre-1775 mill facilities likely the result of the area's limited number of streams capable of powering these operations.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Although the first meetinghouse of Rochester was located at Little Neck, very little settlement seems to have taken place at Marion in the 18th century and consequently, little architectural evidence remains from the period. No two-story houses are known although at least a few two-story houses, probably the more modest end-chimney, half-house type, undoubtedly were constructed during the period. Of the story-and-a-half

center-chimney cottages surviving in Marion, at least a few probably date from the period, especially those along the Rochester Road north of Route 6. The cottage would seem to have been the most common house type of the period.

Institutional: The first meetinghouse of Rochester was constructed at Little Neck c.1683; no architectural information is known about this building, which was replaced by a more centrally-located meetinghouse in Rochester c.1699.

F. Observations:

Along with Mattapoisett, Marion was the center of Old Rochester's maritime activities during the Colonial Period. The community failed to establish civic, religious (aside from shortlived Witch's Rock meetinghouse and Quaker meetinghouse) and industrial facilities inhibiting community autonomy. Settlement residents sought these services in present Rochester and Wareham. However, a closer examination of Marion's late 17C and 18C economic and demographic development is needed because of insufficient coverage provided by existing secondary sources. Marion's continued lack of development suggests a high probability of surviving Colonial Period archeological sites, particularly in the inland areas, Sippican Neck and land north of Great Hill.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highway network intact from 18th century with improvement of local roads to Sippican Harbor landings (Marion) as Main St wharf.

B. Population:

Population figures not available for the period prior to incorporation in 1852. Congregational Meetinghouse built in Lower Village 1799 as Marion becomes the 4th precinct of Rochester.

C. Settlement:

Some residential development occurred at the Lower Village near the wharves, north near Happy Alley (near the intersection of Rochester and County Roads) and on the Weweantic River near the salt works north and across from Cromset Point.

D. ECONOMIC BASE:

Though Marion had a larger, better protected harbor than Mattapoisett, its shallow depth prevented the extensive shipbuilding and whaling industry which developed in Marion's sister town in the Federal period. By the 1830's, Marion, though the older of the two communities, was two thirds the size of Mattapoisett.

Instead, Marion developed an extensive salt business, prompted initially by the interruption of West Indian supplies during the war and Embargo years. By 1823, Abraham Holmes, describing old Rochester, maintained that "more salt is manufactured in this town (primarily Marion) than in any other town in the Commonwealth; and it is the most productive of any business here practised." Salt works were said to be "all over Sippican, and the windmills of these saltworks were a distinctive feature of the village landscape" (Mattapoisett and Old Rochester, p. 300).

Marion, like the Buzzards Bay communities on either side of her, had an extensive coasting trade; and the Bird Island Light, a stone tower built in 1819, became a key feature in the shipping of the Bay -- particularly for iron-ore coasting vessels running into or out of Wareham.

E. Architecture:

Residential: With increased maritime activity (salt works and whaling), residential construction increased and a small but tight grid of streets developed at the town center along the Main Street/Front Street axis. The story-and-a-half cottage remained the most common form regardless of location although away from the town center, on Point and County Roads, full five-bay center-chimney cottages predominated while in the more densely-settled town center, half- and three-quarter plan cottages were more common. Both center and twin interior chimney cottage forms were used. Two-story houses are unusual although a few are known at the town center. Because of the later elite development of Marion as a seaside resort, the early 19th-century character of the town center has been actively preserved thus obscuring the original modest character of the town: most of the houses in Marion were modestly-detailed examples of the Federal style with little pretention, however, in their present state of preservation, the cottages acquire a more substantial character.

Institutional: The Quakers, who had founded a meetinghouse at North Marion in 1707 and later left for Sandwich in 1740, returned to Marion in 1815, but appear to have worshipped in Acushnet. In 1799, 16 district schools were established at Old Rochester, of which at least a few must have stood in Marion (Sippican); none of these are known to survive.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Improvement of coastal corridor across upper Sippican Harbor from Marion to Wareham as Wareham Rd (Route 6) by mid-19th century. Branch railroad from Middleborough to Fairhaven through Marion (1854) along inland route from Sippican River bridge (now abandoned).

B. Population:

Population is 1855 (first census after incorporation) 969, remains relatively stable to 1870.

C. Settlement:

Residential development centered around the Lower Village which tended to reflect worker housing, whaling captains tended to settle near the Old Landing and inland. The coming of the railroad in 1855 had little immediate impact on the development of the town.

D. Economic Base:

Salt remained the leading business for the first decades of the period, surviving as an industry through the Civil War. In addition, three shipyards were in operation as late as 1865. Between Mattapoisett and Marion together there were 60 sail of merchant and coasting vessels (1839); two whalers were recorded in Marion's first industrial census in 1855. Limited whaling and shipbuilding activity, however, was brought to a halt by the three-fold calamity

which hit these industries in the late 1850's: the discovery of petroleum in 1856; the Panic of 1857; and the Civil War, when Confederate raiders harrassed New England whalers. Of the first phenomenon, there was no more apt symbol than the stone petroleum refinery built by Capt. Henry Allen (retired whaling captain?) about 1860. In 1865 six men were employed producing annually 34,000 gallons of kerosene worth \$30,000. Marion's largest industry was short-lived, however: when an explosion blew the roof off, the building was not repaired.

Some farming existed in the interior of the town, but by 1865, Marion, with 50 farms, had about half the number of neighboring Mattapoisett (as well as little more than half the population).

E. Architecture:

Residential: Marion's maritime prosperity peaked around the mid-century with the result that a high proportion of Greek Revival and Italianate houses, a few of some stylistic pretention, were constructed in the town. Sidehall plan cottages predominate in the town center, but conservative center-entrance, five-bay facade, twin interior chimney cottages continued to be built, updated with heavily-scaled Greek Revival trim. Away from the town center, at North Marion along Point, Rochester and Front Streets, several ambitious Greek Revival/Italianate sidehall houses with elaborate rope moldings, Corinthian-capped pilasters and roundhead windows were constructed along with simpler sidehall Greek Revival and Greek Revival/Italianate houses and cottages. A few cottages of the 1850's incorporate recessed verandas and steep single or paired facade gables but most of the residences are simply-detailed venacular structures. Residential construction is concentrated at East Marion, the intersection of Point, Delano and Wareham Roads, Front and County Roads and at the town center.

Institutional: Several important institutional buildings were constructed in the period, the most imposing of which is the Congregational church (c.1840), a two-story Greek Revival building with a two-stage square steeple. The other buildings were given by one of Marion's most prominent 19th-century citizens, Elizabeth Taber; these are the Town Hall (c.1870) a two-and-a-half story late Italianate building with an offset tower and a later Colonial Revival addition (c.1895), and the Taber Library (c.1860), an elaborately-detailed Greek Revival/Italianate building, two stories tall. Both are located on Spring Street at the intersection of Main.

Commercial: A few two-story Greek Revival/Italianate stores were built at the town center in the 1850's; these are gable-roofed buildings with simple Italianate detailing and three-bay, center-entered facades.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Road and rail system maintained from mid-19th century with extension of trolley routes along coastal corridor from New Bedford to Cape Cod following Mill St and Wareham Rd through Marion Center on Main-Spring Sts.

B. Population:

Population relatively stable 1870 to 1890, slight drop in 1895 then dramatic increase to 1915. (759 to 1487) Foreign born population grows from 48 in 1885 to 332 in 1915. Majority of the in-migrants Portuguese (211 in 1915). St. Gabriels Episcopal Church established for summer residents in 1874.

C. Settlement:

Summer resort development in the Lower Village and south to Converse Point with some estates built prior to the turn of the century. Summer development also at East Marion and at Great Hill.

D. Economic Base:

Marion began to develop as a summer colony beginning in the 1870's, but it was not until about 1880 that the New York arts community, led by Century editor Richard Gilder, discovered Marion. Henry James wrote lyrically of the town in The Bostonians (1886), praising:

the sweetness begotten of low horizons, of mild air,
with a possibility of summer haze, of unregarded inlets
where on August mornings the water must be brightly blue.

"There is a mild speculation in the land," wrote Alice Ryder of this period, "and two or three more summer cottages are built. Times are improving in the sea villages." With the first visit of Mrs. Grover Cleveland to Marion in August 1887, the town suddenly awoke to national attention as "one of nature's sequestered breathing spots" (Ryder); property values rose by leaps and bounds.

In the interior of the town, permanent residents continued farming and some cranberry growing, while box boards, shingles, and barrel staves continued to be products of mills on Aucoot Creek and the Sippican River.

E. Architecture:

Residential: During the Late Industrial period, Marion was developed as an important elite summer resort. After 1880, Great Hill, Sippican Neck and Marion center, along Water Street, were built up with large and imposing Shingle Style, Colonial and Mission Revival summer estates, many of these architect-designed mansions with well-detailed and extensive compounds with outbuildings; most of the houses on Delano Road (Great Hill) and Point Road (Sippican Neck) are contained within walled complexes. Elsewhere in the town center, along Spring, Converse, and Mill Streets, much smaller and less pretentious sidehall Queen Anne and Colonial Revival houses were constructed in smaller numbers. Secondary concentrations of period housing, dating from the 1880's and '90s, stand at the intersection of Front and County Roads, north of Wareham Road. These include at least one well-detailed mansard-roofed, two-story house (c.1870) on Front Street. The most modest housing of the period are simply-detailed, small sidehall vernacular Queen Anne houses and cottages at the intersection of Point and Wareham Roads.

Institutional:

Institutional buildings of the period reflect the influx of wealth during the period with several outstanding institutional structures built at the town center including a two-story Shingle Style library with a raised cobblestone basement, recessed canted end wall turrets (c.1885, architect unknown) and a story-and-a-half brick Queen Anne Armory with classical detailing in terracotta. Additions were also made to the Town Hall which was updated with Colonial Revival details. Also built was the Tabor Academy, a complex of half-timbered Tudor Revival buildings built after 1900 on Front Street. Less ambitious institutional buildings of the period include St. Gabriel's Episcopal chapel, a story-and-a-half Shingle Style summer chapel with a bellcote, the Masonic Temple (c.1885), a frame Italianate/Colonial Revival building, two stories tall with elaborate detailing, and the Methodist Church (c.1890) on Point Road at Front Street, a modest Queen Anne chapel with an offset tower.

Commercial:

The best preserved commercial buildings of the period stand on Front Street north of Wareham Road (Route 6). These include two two-story vernacular Queen Anne stores with well-preserved storefronts. Also built during the period was a one-story, hip-roofed stucco Mission Revival tennis club (c.1910) on Holmes Street, notable for its peristylar plan.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Abandonment of trolley line and improvement of coastal corridor for auto highways with Route 6 (Mill St-Wareham Rd) as primary east/west connector from Cape Cod to New Bedford. Local inland Route 105 (Rochester Rd) to Rochester and Middleborough from Marion center.

B. Population:

Drop in population during the twenties then steady increase to end of period. St. Rita's Roman Catholic Church built for 'domestic servants' 1916.

C. Settlement:

Continuation of summer development along coast and in the Lower Village.

D. Economic Base:

Continued development of Marion as a summer resort community. Most sawmills cease operation, though farming retained in interior sections. Only identified new industry, RCA's giant transatlantic wireless station (c.1920?). Wireless telegraphy was initially divided between sending and receiving; the red-brick transmitting facilities at Marion were matched by similar receiving facilities at Chatham on the Cape.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Comparatively little construction took place during the period. Most of the houses constructed were small Craftsman and Colonial Revival cottages and houses concentrations of which are located on Delano Road near Route 6 and on lower Front Street as well as along Mill and Converse Streets.

Institutional:

The two major institutional buildings of the period are the Sippican School (c.1935), a yellow brick one-story Modern school with a stylized Georgian Revival cupola on Spring Street and Saint Rita's Church (c.1930) on Main Street, a one-story brick structure with modest Beaux-Arts trim.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

Marion has completed only four inventory forms; the town badly needs surveying although with its present resort character, no active threats are known, other than development. Particularly significant would be the identification of surviving 18th century resources. Architecturally, some of the most notable mid-19th-century buildings are away from the town center north of Route 6. The potential exists that major architects may have worked in Marion at the end of the 19th-century. Stanford White is known to have done interior design at the Stone Studio on Spring Street); that potential should be investigated.

Industrial: Marion's limited survey did identify the "Old Stone Studio" -- the 1860 stone petroleum refinery built by Capt. Henry Allen. The building's original function in itself would make the structure NR eligible; its subsequent association with the arts community, Richard Gilder, and Stanford White enhances its significance.

Marion also has its original 1854 Fairhaven Branch Railroad station, later turned around and used as a depot on the adjacent electric trolley line. The Bird Island Light (1819) -- the stone lighthouse on an island 850 yards off Sippican Neck -- is one of the earliest of Buzzards Bary navigational aids. Further study should also be given to the RCA wireless station compound at the north end of the village.

Developmental Pressures:

Intensive commercial activity around Route 6 and Interstate 195 junction (Route 105) has nearly overwhelmed historic fabric of Old Landing area along Rochester Road, while much of former Route 6 strip development now abandoned for Interstate 195. Coastal locations around Sippican Harbor maintained as affluent suburban estate district with conscious historic preservation in Marion center. These areas could suffer potential storm damage from severe tropical hurricanes.

XII. SOURCES

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