

# MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

## NEW BRAINTREE

Report Date: 1984

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 RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

DATE: 1984

COMMUNITY: New Braintree

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### I. TOPOGRAPHY

The town of New Braintree lies in the southwestern portion of Worcester County, forming--with neighboring Oakham and North Brookfield--a high plateau between the Ware River Valley to the north and northwest, Mill Brook to the west, Quaboag River to the south, and Five Mile River to the east. Elevations in the town generally range between 900 and 1,100 feet above sea level, descending steeply to less than 700 feet above sea level in the Ware River Valley. The portion of the town south of New Braintree Station, which forms the eastern side of the Ware River Valley, is very rough, stony land, while most of the central and eastern portions of the town consist of high rounded hills or drumlins, glacially formed hills composed of till.

In addition to the Ware River and its several tributary streams, the western and central portions of the town area drained by Sucker and Meadow brooks, which eventually join the southerly-flowing Mill Brook into West Brookfield. In the eastern corner of the town, several streams flow to the east and southeast, draining into the Five Mile River in Oakham and North Brookfield.

New Braintree's soils consist mostly of Brookfield and Paxton loams, as the town sits on the western half of a broad, north-south band of Brookfield and Paxton soils extending from Warren and Sturbridge north to Rutland and Hubbardston. Where the soil is not too stony for cultivation, the Brookfield and Paxton loams yield excellent crops of hay and grains, being among the best agricultural soils of the county. The stony soils were generally used for permanent pasture.

During the late 18th and early 19 centuries, bog iron was mined along Winimisset Brook in New Braintree for use in furnaces in neighboring Hardwick.

### II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Established as a district in 1751 from Braintree grant of 1715, and parts of Hardwick (Lambstown grant of 1686, incorporated 1739), and of Brookfield (enlarged township grant of 1718). Made a town in 1775. Part annexed to Hardwick in 1814.

### III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Upland agricultural and residential community located on secondary highland routes east of the Ware River corridor, with significant native sites on floodplain terraces near the Ware River/Winimisset (sic) Brook confluence. Site of major early (1675)

native/European battle of King Philip's War on Winimusset Brook. Located at northern periphery of early 18th century Brookfield settlement, with first Brookfield sawmill (1709) in the south, and seasonal burning and extensive livestock grazing as part of Braintree Farms in the north. Permanent European settlement is established in the north by ca. 1730 on or near the Ware River floodplain. Dispersed 18th century upland agricultural settlement follows, with meetinghouse site established by 1752. Meetinghouse center develops as small residential/commercial focus, but no sustained 19th century industrial development takes place. Some farmstead abandonment occurs in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Relatively little postwar suburban development has occurred, and functional, historic agricultural landscapes remain throughout town.

#### IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

##### A. Transportation Routes

Highlands west of Ware River corridor, with Meminimisset (Winimusset) Brook tributary. Main east/west trail north of Brookfield highlands (Worcester Road-Oakham Road-West Brookfield Road-Gilbertville Road-Mara Road) with southern branches to Wickaboag probably North Brookfield Road, West Brookfield Road (along Sucker Brook tributary). Northwest branch to Meminimisset conjectured on Thompson Road-Hardwick Road. Northern east-west trail Ravine Road-Hardwick Road to Ware River crossing. North-south highland trail west of Winimusset Brook on West Road.

##### B. Settlement Pattern

Although the town is reputed to have several sites, no known contact sites have been discovered. The presence of multicomponent (through Woodland) sites east of Winimusset Brook on knolls near Barre cutoff suggests that similar areas throughout the town were visited through this period.

##### C. Subsistence Pattern

Short-term, seasonal use by family or task groups for hunting and fishing in town brooks.

#### V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

##### A. Transportation Routes

Contact period routes continue in use.

##### B. Settlement Pattern

Continuation of the pattern established during the Contact period with some reduction due to increased presence of colonials. No permanent settlement by colonials.

### C. Subsistence Pattern

Continuation of the pattern established during the Contact period.

## VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

### A. Transportation Routes

First road from Old Furnace (Hardwick) to Brookfield in 1730 (Hardwick Road-West Road-Gilbertville Road-West Brookfield Road). Native trails are improved as east-west highways, with junction of roads from Hardwick (Hardwick Road-Thompson Road) and Ware (Mara Road-Gilbertville Road-West Brookfield Road-Oakham Road) east of meetinghouse center, continuing east as Worcester Road. Northeast road from Brookfield (North Brookfield Road) passes through eastern corner. Local routes radiate from the meetinghouse center after 1752.

### B. Population

At the time of incorporation, 1751, there were 14 families in the Braintree Farms area, 12 in the section of Brookfield, 18 in the section of Hardwick, plus 16 nonresident proprietors. By 1764, the population was 594, in 1776 it was 798.

Like neighboring Oakham, some of New Braintree's early settlers were recent Scots-Irish immigrants, and they had been in favor of the proposal to unite with the former Rutland West Wing area. They were outnumbered, however, by native New Englanders who established their Congregational Church in 1754.

### C. Settlement Pattern

In 1660 the citizens of Braintree had been awarded an addition of 6,000 acres of land due to the high portion of nonresident landowners in the town. In 1715, an area "in the angle" between Brookfield and Rutland was selected, and administered from there for the next 35 years. As settlers came to the area, neighboring towns vied for annexation, first Hardwick (1738) and later Rutland West Wing (1749), before its final form was settled on in 1751. This consisted of Braintree Farms as the right half of the triangle which forms the town, the left from Hardwick, east of the Ware River, the bottom from Brookfield. At the same time, a common and meetinghouse were set out to the south of the geographical center of the irregularly shaped town.

### D. Economic Base

Classified by Pruitt as an Egalitarian Farm Town, with few poor farms and little commercial activity or extremes of wealth. Sources claim stock wintered here prior to permanent settlement from Braintree. An early mill (1709) was established on the Mill Brook from Brookfield.

## E. Architecture

**Residential:** Very few datable surviving buildings. However, of special note is a 1 1/2-story, four-bay, brick, gambrel-roofed dwelling just north of the center. The house is located on the west side of Hardwick Road and faces west at the Barre Cutoff. The interior has been gutted, but the position of the summer beam and a cut in the floor beneath it indicate the house was originally a hall-parlor plan with the partition shifted (or a second partition added) north of the entrance. The building could date from as early as the third quarter of the 18th century. The date of the frame rear wing is unknown.

Just north of the above house, on Slein Road, is a two-story, five-bay, double pile, center chimney house facing south toward the center. A number of two-story, five-bay, double chimney houses with little distinctive detailing except for Greek Revival door surrounds were noted in the field. These may be either late Colonial period or possibly Federal period dwellings with updated door treatments. A smaller number of center chimney dwellings, likewise undatable, were observed.

**Institutional:** The first meetinghouse was erected between 1752 and 1753, measured 40 x 50 feet, and was "to be enclosed and clap boarded" (Hurd). Porches were added to the east and west ends in 1772 and the building was described at this period as being a "dingy yellow" color.

The first schools were built in 1760 and 1774, respectively.

## VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

### A. Transportation Routes

The Colonial period highways continue in use. The northern east-west route (Ravine Road-Hardwick Road) is built or improved as part of the Sixth Massachusetts Turnpike (1800) from Shrewsbury to Greenwich.

### B. Population

The population of the town fluctuated during this period, rising from 798 in 1776, reaching highs of 939 in 1790 and 912 in 1800, dropping thereafter to 825 in 1830. Agriculture remained the primary employment. Within the Congregational society there were disagreements between the minister and the Trinitarian Brookfield Association. Reportedly, 23 men supported Shays' Rebellion. Throughout the period the poor were auctioned to the highest bidder for maintenance.

### C. Settlement Pattern

Dispersed agricultural settlement continues, with a second meetinghouse built in 1800, and a brick store nearby in 1816. Little other development occurs.

#### D. Economic Base

New Braintree's economy was almost wholly agricultural throughout its history.

A moderate proportion, 59.7%, of the town's land was unimproved and woodlot in 1784, with an additional 11.2% classed as unimprovable. A high figure, 13.3%, was calculated for mowing and meadowlands, with a moderate amount of pasturage and tillage, 10.9% and 4.8% respectively.

By the late 18th century, it had already attained a reputation for its fine grazing land and the annual production of the dairy and of beef. New Braintree cheese was well known in Boston by 1800 and as the profits from dairying increased and the town's farmers prospered, the fattening of cattle declined. In 1832, a report to the Secretary of the Treasury claimed New Braintree's farmers were famous for their cheese, butter, and pork, and supplied the Boston market with more than \$22,000 worth of goods annually. Sheepraising was common, but declined during the 1810s and 1820s. Nevertheless, more than 650 sheep, largely the valuable Merino breed, were kept on the town's farms in 1837.

Manufacturing occurred on a very limited basis during this period. Only two small sawmills were in existence by 1830, and in 1812, a small woolen mill was erected along the Ware River. However, the return of trade with Great Britain after the conclusion of the war in 1815 seriously affected the woolen mills' success. It continued to operate for some years, but at a constant pecuniary loss. Palm leaf hatmaking was carried out in the town's homes by at least 55 women and children, who produced 25,000 hats in 1832. Iron ore was mined along Winimisset Brook during this period for use in the iron furnaces in Hardwick, Brookfield, and Stafford, Connecticut. In 1832, 300-500 tons of ore were mined.

#### E. Architecture

**Residential:** Very few one-story houses. Two rear wall chimney, single-pile, two-story, five-bay dwellings noted. Center and double chimney, two-story forms appear to have predominated. Again the two-story, five-bay, double chimney house appears frequently, but is undatable except for Greek Revival door surrounds which are possibly later accoutrements to these potentially Federal period buildings. One probable fourth-quarter 18th century house noted on Worcester Road in southeast New Braintree is two stories with a five-bay facade, center chimney, rear leanto and an intricate cornice with beaded molding.

**Institutional:** The second meetinghouse was erected between 1800 and 1802.

A town hall and school building was erected in the center (north of the 1816 brick store). It was a two-story frame structure measuring 27 x 43 feet. Prior to the erection of this school

building, eight schoolhouses had been constructed throughout the town by 1796.

Commercial: Joseph Bowman, Jr. and John Wetherell constructed the elegant two-story, hipped roof, brick store in the center in 1816. The walls are laid in Flemish bond, and the building measures 60 x 30 feet.

## VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

### A. Transportation Routes

The early 19th century roads continue in use.

### B. Population

Fluctuation continued to characterize population change in the town, and overall the totals diminish. The figures surpassed 800 in 1830, 1845, and 1860, reaching a high of 852 in 1845. In other years the figure was around 750, and dropped to 640 in 1870. As in all towns, agriculture increased greatly, but here manufacturing remained quite small. Still, some immigrants came to the town, dominated by the Irish and accounting for 14.17% of the population. During the early years of the period a group of 48 men formed a Thief Detecting Society in 1832 and a temperance house was established in the center in 1837. In 1833 the town instituted a poor farm. There was some disagreement between Trinitarians and Unitarians within the parish, but no new religious organizations were formed.

### C. Settlement Pattern

A hotel (1837) and cheese factory (1865) are located in the center northwest of the meetinghouse, and some linear residential concentration develops north on Main Street.

### D. Economic Base

Agriculture remained the major economic pursuit of New Braintree's residents during this period, with dairying the leading activity. More than 1,000 milkcows were kept on the town's farms and cheese production was consistently well above 200,000 lbs. annually. In 1865 the New Braintree Cheese Mfg. Co. was established, centralizing production in a single building rather than in the dairies of individual farms. As dairying increased in importance, the amount of land devoted to hay increased, while land devoted to growing corn and other grains generally declined. The cultivation of potatoes, however, expanded through the period. In 1845, 150,000 lbs. of beef and 100,000 lbs. of pork were slaughtered in New Braintree; by 1865 the amounts of beef and pork from the town's 97 farms fell to 111,000 lbs. and 72,000 lbs. respectively. Oxen outnumbered horses in the town's farms until the 1850s, when the increased emphasis on dairying, demand for hay, and introduction of light, horse-drawn hay machinery and plows made horses more desirable.

Manufacturing remained minor. Palm leaf hatmaking lasted into the 1850s, though production declined steadily through the 1840s and 1850s. Cotton manufacturing was introduced in the mid 1830s, but by 1845 the small mill had closed permanently, probably a casualty of the seven-year depression which followed the Panic of 1837. Boot- and shoemaking was begun in 1839 when several New Braintree men contracted with a South Carolina merchant to make 2,000 pairs of shoes per month, probably for slave wear. Production continued through the 1850s, with less than 15,000 pairs made annually. Carriage-making was carried out in several small shops between the 1820s and 1860s, and shoe and spoke shaves were manufactured in several small shops during the 1840s and 1850s.

#### E. Architecture

Residential: Based on survivals, very little building activity occurred. Few two-story, three-bay, side-passage plans and one single-story, five-bay, double chimney house noted for the Greek Revival style. A two-story, five-bay, double-pile, double chimney house in the center displays Greek pilasters.

North of the center at the junction of Hardwick and Thompson Roads is a ca. 1836 two-story, five-bay, gable end, center entry temple front with a flushboard facade and handsome trim.

Little significant development in the latter portion of the period.

Institutional: The 1802 meetinghouse was entirely remodelled in 1846 and offices for town hall provided for on the first level. In 1865, the former town hall of 1816 was enlarged; a cheese factory was installed on the first floor.

The New Braintree Temperance House was built in 1837; the building burned in 1880. Five schools were constructed in 1865.

### IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

#### A. Transportation Routes

The Central Massachusetts Railroad passes through town at two points on the western border along the Ware River corridor, with a station at the Hardwick Road/West Road intersection.

#### B. Population

Total population figures continue to drop throughout the period, from 640 in 1870 to 453 in 1915, making it one of the smallest towns in the county. Within the shrinking population the foreign-born became more numerous, rising to nearly 25% of the total by period's end. The Irish did not continue in large numbers, and the group during this period was strikingly diverse, including nearly equal numbers of Canadians, Lithuanians, and Poles. Manufacturing continued to be a much smaller source of employment than agriculture, employing only one in nine males.



### C. Settlement Pattern

An 1880 fire destroys the hotel and cheese factory in New Braintree Center. Dispersed agricultural settlement continues, with some farm abandonment.

### D. Economic Base

Manufacturing in New Braintree all but disappeared during this period. The cheese factory was converted to a creamery in 1886, as butter and milk replaced cheese as the principal dairy products. By the 1890s even the creamery was abandoned. Carriage and wagon-making resumed during the 1880s, and in 1885 it was the principal manufacturing industry with products valued at \$3,635. A sawmill, blacksmith, and two small boot and shoe shops continued into the 1890s.

As milk production and sales increased, reaching nearly 700,000 gallons by 1905, the ninth highest figure for Worcester County, most other areas of agricultural production declined. Grain cultivation experienced the greatest decline followed by beef and veal. Pork however, increased in quantity toward the end of the century. Also increasing was the quantity and value of hay, poultry, and fruit raised. Ice production paralleled the growth of milk sales. Between 1895 and 1905 the number of dairy farms increased threefold, while mixed farms declined by one-third, a result of increased agricultural specialization.

### E. Architecture

Residential: Based on survivals, there appears to have been no significant development during this period.

Institutional: The Colonial Revival, two-story, traditional meetinghouse in the center was built in 1912.

## X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

### A. Transportation Routes

In the 1920s, the road from Barre Plains south through New Braintree to North Brookfield (Barre Road) is improved as Route 67. By the 1930s, the roads to New Braintree Center from Gilbertville and West Brookfield are improved as secondary local highways.

### B. Population

Population totals fluctuated during this period with little overall growth. The highest figure was that of 1915 when it equalled 453, while the lowest, 394, was reached only five years later. After fluctuating again, the population was 439 in 1940, the period's close. Within this change, the proportion of foreign-born within the town dropped from a high of 25% in 1915 to a low of 16.2%. Manufacturing remained the employment of only a

fraction of the town's citizens, but 76%, the highest in the county, were classified as rural.

#### C. Settlement Pattern

Little change occurs. Farm abandonment continues.

#### D. Economic Base

New Braintree remained essentially an agricultural town, as farming continued to be the main occupation of most of the town's residents. Dairying, poultry-raising, and orcharding were the leading activities. No new manufacturing firms appeared in New Braintree, and aside from a blacksmith shop and sawmill, very little manufacturing continued through the period.

#### E. Architecture

The only development of any sort noted was the two-story frame grade school (1939) in the center.

### XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

Little building activity appears to have occurred in New Braintree after 1850. However, only the brick store (1816) in the center is inventoried and the town has many buildings which should be recorded.

### XII. SOURCES