

# MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

## NEEDHAM

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: January 1980

Community: Needham

## I. TOPOGRAPHY

Located on rocky uplands within a loop of the Charles River. Several prominent elevations and considerable exposed bedrock especially in southern and eastern sections. Gravelly, rolling plain in central part of town and intermittently along Charles. Some upland ponds and streams -- all drain into Charles. Somewhat isolated due to virtual encirclement by river.

## II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Part of Dedham grant, 1636. Used as Dedham common land during 17th century. Native title extinguished by purchase, 1680. Part of Great Plain called "The School Farm", 1695 -- used to support Dedham school. Incorporated as Town of Needham, 1711.

## III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Boston suburban industrial community surrounded by Charles River marshes. Topographic isolation limited native access, except along Charles River where potentially important sites might exist, most notably at Powells Island. Restricted development in 17th century until bridges constructed over Charles in early 18th century. Formation of town center at base of North Hill and agricultural district along Great Plain by mid 18th century with some good period houses. Economic development in early 19th century at Charles River mill sites, with typical Federal period houses along Colonial roads. Shift of focus from original town center to railroad axis along Great Plain during mid-19th century with modest suburban development of Victorian design. Continued economic expansion of industrial (textile) activity around Needham center into early 20th century with extensive suburban development along trolley routes from Boston. Numerous modest period houses, some of interesting Arts & Crafts and Tudor design with Neo-Colonial town center and brick industrial buildings. Increasing suburban pressure by mid-20th century with location along Boston belt highway (Route 128) and proximity to status residential areas in neighboring Wellesley, Dedham and Dover.

## IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

### A. Transportation Routes:

Isolated by Charles River loop with no documented native trails in town histories. Nevertheless, it appears likely that a local path extended across the area from the documented "ford" at Newton Upper Falls (Clarke, 1912), southwest following Central Street around Rosemary and Fuller Brooks to the Charles River where a possible ford existed across to Dover. A secondary branch is also conjectured south-east from Central Street past High Rock (known native site) to the Charles River marshes along present course of High Rock Street. It is also probable that a cross trail linked from Central Avenue at North Hill to the ford at Newton Lower Falls along Rosemary Brook as Brookside Street -- although no

documentary evidence confirms this hypothesis.

B. Settlement Pattern:

No period sites reported. Potential site areas include well-drained terraces along Charles, especially at Upper Falls and confluences with major tributaries, and adjacent to upland ponds.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Fishing weirs reported in Charles along with scattered artifacts (Clarke, 1912, p. 11). Excellent food gathering potential in adjacent bogs and marsh areas as well. Close enough to coast for contact materials to be present.

D. Observations:

Little known about pattern of native occupation during period. Powells Island should be considered sensitive.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails serve as local highways from Newton (Watertown-Cambridge) to Dover-Dedham, with probable axis along Central Street from Cook's Bridge at Upper Falls to Fischer's Bridge at Dover with High Rock Street and Pine and Grove Streets as secondary branches. South Street along Charles River extended in 1669.

B. Population:

Possibly some scattered native inhabitants.

C. Settlement:

No European settlement during period although area was known and some land grants made.

D. Economic Base:

Some prospecting for metals around High Rock, 1640s. Possibly some use of Great Plain area for grazing by Dedham.

E. Observations:

Though area was known, it remained undeveloped; Charles River served as effective barrier.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1676-1776)

A. Transportation Routes:

Isolation of area remains until late 17th century when connecting

links are opened from emergent center on Central Avenue to Dedham, Natick and Newton, including highway to Lower Falls as Brookside Road (1694). In early 18th century highways laid across Great Plain from Dedham causeway as Great Plan Avenue and loop to town center as Nehoiden Street. Secondary roads extended around Rosemary Brook to Charles River crossing at Kendrick Street bridge (by 1716) to Newton as Hunnewell, Rosemary and Greendale Streets with cross-links to main western highway (Route 16) in Wellesley as Forest Street and Great Plain Avenue by 1701. Mid-18th century highways infilled basic network including Webster and Cedar Streets. Old loop of Noyes Street remains below Central at former town center.

B. Population:

Slow growth post King Philip's War, increased rapidly during first decades of 18th century, then steady growth up to the Revolution. Census of 1765 listed 945 inhabitants (168 families) and 129 houses (this included Wellesley). Most people from Dedham.

C. Settlement:

Primarily scattered farms, concentrated in Great Plain area and along Charles. Town center developed around meetinghouse, built 1712 between North Hill and Rosemary Lake (Central and Nehoiden Streets). Burying ground established 1712. Other axis of development was along Central Street--at Upper Falls of Charles on north end and around Fischer's Bridge/Charles River Village at the southwest end.

D. Economic Base:

Primarily agriculture and grazing plus winter lumbering. Orchards and tanneries as supplmenets. Some milling along Charles: saw mill (John Clark) 1688, Upper Falls; saw mill (John Fisher) 1755-1771, Charles River Village; grist mill (Josiah Newell) 1775 (?), off South Street. No taverns built in town.

E. Architecture

Residential: Remarkably little evidence of 18th century settlement; no houses recorded by HABS; several early 18th century houses believed to remain (central-chimney, two-story--MHC Survey). One unsurveyed, possible 18th century house exists on Webster Street near Dedham Avenue, although this structure has been rebuilt in the Queen Anne style; one drastically altered gambrel cottage remains (MHC Survey).

Institutional: Meetinghouse built 1713-1717, burned 1773; meetinghouse (60' x 43') build 1774, dismantled 1836 and its timber used in building third meetinghouse; no known school houses extant.

Commercial and Industrial: No known structures extant.

F. Observations:

Despite proximity to large population centers, retained a rather rural small town character. Despite bridges, Charles River continued to keep town somewhat isolated.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Colonial highways remain as road system with primary axis along Central Street from Newton Upper Falls to Dover and along Great Plain Avenue from Dedham to Wellesley. No turnpikes directly through the area, although Worcester Turnpike built across Charles River just over Needham line. Webster Street laid out across Great Plain in early 19th century and loop of Marked Tree Street around town center to Great Plain.

B. Population:

Population (including modern Wellesley) fluctuated around 1,000 until 1810-1820 after which it began to increase; Baptist Congregation formed 1780, ceased by 1795; Methodist Congregation, ca. 1799, failed.

C. Settlement Location:

Continued farm settlement; a small village formed along Central Avenue near Great Plain Avenue and Nehoiden Street; a small manufacturing village (Charles River Village) developed on South Street by 1831; several houses on Central Avenue near the Charles River represented the outer limits of the village at the Upper Falls, most of which was in Newton.

D. Economic Base:

Most activity along Charles River in Federal Period located in Newton and what is now Wellesley. As at Lower Falls (Newton/Wellesley), Charles River Village early location of paper mills (by 1796).

E. Architecture:

Residential: Largest number of houses extant from this period have symmetrical center-entrance facades, pitched roofs, one-room deep floorplans, twin rear-wall chimneys and simple Federal style doorways; buildings of the same general design, but only one-storey height also exist, particularly at Charles River Village. There is no evidence of any high-style Federal architecture; the most elaborate example of the period contain transitional Georgian/Federal details (MHC Survey -- Needham Farm 107).

Institutional: No meetinghouses built except for 1799 Methodist meetinghouse which was soon abandoned and converted to other uses (Clarke, p. 259 -- possibly located in Wellesley); district schools established 1790s, none known to remain.

Commercial: No known commercial buildings.

Industrial: Mill at Charles River Village after 1796, no structures extant.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highways remain in place from early 19th century. Charles River Rail-

road extended as secondary branch from Newton Upper Falls to Needham Great Plain 1853 and extended again across Charles River to Dover in 1861. Needham Street built across Charles River 1875 from Needham Heights to Newton Upper Falls.

B. Population:

Rapid growth between 1840 and 1855, and between 1865 and 1870; population statistics include modern Wellesley; much of population increases came from immigration, particularly Irish immigration (ca. 1845-55); Methodist congregation formed at Needham Heights (1867), Evangelical Congregational Church founded, 1857; Baptist Congregation formed (1838, church in Needham, 1855).

C. Settlement Location:

Land speculation and extension of railroad encouraged settlement of Needham Great Plain Village (junction Highland Avenue and Great Plain Avenue) and, to a lesser degree, Highlandville (now named Needham Heights) where many of the town's English immigrants settled during and after the 1860s. Land speculation and building reached peaks between 1862-1872, after which many planned subdivisions remained undeveloped until the early 20th century (Clarke, p. 424).

D. Economic Base:

Industrial employment and production reached a peak around 1855 from which they had declined by 1865, presumably an effect of the Civil War. Manufacture of knit goods introduced prior to 1833; by 1840s and '50s absorbed considerable employment. J. Beless a pioneer in manufacture of underwear before Civil War (Needham Heights). Other industries included silk, blue, hats, and shoes. Cultivation of silk worms in 1840s short-lived. Glue factory initially set up by Robert Evans, and its ease of manufacture led apprentices to set up shops on their own. Competition with larger firms ruinous and few survived to 1870. All in East Needham, as were hat shops: 3 by 1831 but few manufactured after 1850. Shoe shops had mostly disappeared by 1870s.

E. Architecture:

Residential: The main focus of new building was Great Plain Village where a full range of modest to high-style Italianate and Second Empire style houses were built after ca. 1850-54. Within the village, the more elaborate houses were built on and north of Great Plain Avenue, while simpler side hall houses and cottages were built on side streets extending south from Great Plain and Dedham Avenues along the railroad bed (Chestnut Street). Few of the more elaborate houses remain, although several hip-roofed Italianate houses and some center-entrance Second Empire houses and one Gothic Cottage are extant. Little at Needham Heights dates from this period, except some very simple side-hall cottages. Examples of Greek Revival architecture are few, of these the most elaborate are a side-hall house with a lattice-work porch (Great Plain Avenue near the Wellesley line) and a symmetrical center-entrance facade house (River Street east of Central Avenue).

Institutional: Active church building during period saw construction of a simple Greek Revival style meetinghouse 1836 (moved and altered 1879-80), and several Italianate style churches at Great Plain Village (extant). As part of the speculative promotion of Great Plain Village, an Italianate style Village Hall was built (1854-demolished). Between 1869 and 1874, the town built 7 new schoolhouses (at least 2 of which are within the bounds of modern Wellesley. One-room school houses were, presumably, eliminated at this time, although at least one temple-front Greek Revival style schoolhouse remains from 1842 (MHC Survey).

Commercial: Commercial blocks built at Great Plain Village, although none appear to remain.

Industrial: No known structures extant.

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

### A. Transportation Routes:

Road and rail system remains from mid-19th century. Street railway service extended from Newton and Dedham (Boston metropolitan system) to Needham Center along Central Webster and Highland from Upper Falls and from Dedham causeway over Great Plain and Dedham Streets in 1890s, with branch to Natick along South and Charles River Streets in early 1900s and soon abandoned. A railroad link from Needham to Dedham over Charles River was opened in 1906 with bridges over main roads and link to existing line at Needham Junction.

### B. Population:

Population grew throughout period; drop in total population between 1880 and 1885 reflects separation of Wellesley (West Needham) from modern Needham (East Needham); rapid growth of foreign-born population 1885-95 and 1905-1915, largest foreign-born group were English immigrants, followed by Irish and Nova Scotians; Catholic Church formed 1891, Episcopalean Church at Needham Heights formed 1895, Christian Science Congregation at Great Plain Village, 1898.

### C. Settlement Location:

Development at Great Plain Village, primarily on streets south of Great Plain Avenue and eastward as far as Webster Street; development at Needham Heights scattered along Hunnewell Street, Webster Street and Highland Avenue; in the southern portion of the town, along the Charles River, country estates were assembled ca. 1890-1915; after 1893-94 subdivisions laid out around "parks", such as Home Park (east side of Highland Avenue), Fremont Park, Highland Park, etc. (Clarke, p. 425).

### D. Economic Basis:

Savings Bank formed 1874, ceased by late 1870s; Needham Co-operative Bank incorporated 1892, many of the founder were land speculators/developers whose projects were financed by the bank. Town newspaper published after 1874. Post Civil War industries dominated by hosiery manufacture in

Needham Heights. Alexander Lynes, first to make children's underwear, 1880s. William Carter Co., great variety of knit goods but best known for children's underwear and union suits, 1880s. In 1875, 11 hosiery establishments with combined product value of \$520,000 -- nearly half the town's total. Second Boston water supply conduit, Sudbury Aqueduct, built through town 1874-76; principal feature; Echo Bridge over Charles River.

#### E. Architecture:

Residential: Some apparent architect-designed, ambitious houses in Victorian Gothic, Queen Anne and eclectic early 20th century houses between Highland Avenue and Webster Street at Great Plain Village and to a lesser degree in the vicinity of Dedham Avenue and in scattered locations at Needham Heights. Most of the development south of Great Plain Avenue and at Needham Heights took the form of simple side-hall houses and cottages in a variety of styles. High-style, architect designed houses were built on estates along South and River Streets, architects known to have designed houses in this area include Parker, Thomas and Rice; James Purdan; Loring and Leland; and Coolidge and Shattuck. Although more than 14 architects are listed in local directories between 1888 and 1915, none of their work has been identified.

Institutional: Public buildings of the period included wood-frame schoolhouses (1869-74) until ca. 1895-1900 when brick schoolhouses such as the High School (1898, Whitman and Hood, architects) and the new Avery School (1906, Lemant D. Litchfield, architect) were built. Classical Revival style architecture was popular for many public buildings, such as the library of 1903-04 (A.R. Ross of New York, architect); however, Colonial/Federal Revival architect became dominant with the building of the present town hall (1902, Winslow and Bigelow, architects) and the construction of a new library on Highland Avenue (1915, James H. Ritchie, architect). Also extant from this period is a simple Beaux Arts style Pumping Station (Dedham Avenue). Church building consisted of the remodelling of existing churches and the construction of several small churches for new congregations, such as the Methodist Episcopal Church at Highlandville (Needham Heights -- 1898, J. H. Preston of Boston, architect) and Christ Church (1900 -- Gordon Fisher of Newton Highlands, architect).

Commercial: Commercial development of Great Plain Village largely dates from this period; several mansard and Victorian Gothic style wood frame blocks were built at Great Plain Avenue (1870s and 1880s); at least two train stations remain, one at Great Plain Village (ca. 1890 -- drastically altered), the other on Junction Street (ca. 1900); in the early 20th century many one and two-storey commercial blocks (Classical Revival and Colonial Revival) were built on Great Plain and Highland Avenues.

Industrial: Scattered wood-frame and concrete shops in Needham Heights, few extant.

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

#### A. Transportation Routes:

Both rail and road remain from late 19th century with abandonment of



street railway in 1920s. Auto highways extended from Boston in 1930s with state route 135 from Dedham to Natick over Great Plain Avenue. Circumferential belt highway around metropolitan area built as Route 128 in 1931 with location along Charles River following Greendale Avenue, Hunting Road and Reservoir Street to Route 9, with cloverleaf at Needham Street. Portions of original bridge still intact with Art Deco design (rebuilt 1955).

B. Population:

Consistent increase throughout period; population nearly doubled during period; predominantly Boston-oriented suburban commuter population.

C. Settlement Location:

Subdivisions created east of Webster Street at Great Plain Village; many streets laid out with planted center strips; continued development at Needham Heights, mostly east of Highland Avenue; small number of small subdivisions laid out in northwest section of town.

D. Economic Base:

Period is marked chiefly by early consolidation of hosiery industry, the William Carter firm being the most prominent holdover from the 19th century. The bulk of Needham's industrial development post-dates World War II and is located along Route 128.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Small number of estates built along River and South Streets; elsewhere, most development was of modest-scale houses, many built in Dutch Colonial and Colonial Revival styles; some larger-size neo-Tudor houses in subdivisions near Wellesley train line. At least one small development of industrial workers' cottages built by the Saco-Lowell Shops on Highland Circle (1923, Lockwood, Greene & Co., architects).

Institutional: Public buildings (schoolhouses and fire stations) generally built of red brick in Colonial Revival style.

Commercial: Continued building of small Colonial Revival style blocks at Great Plain Village; some strip development along Highland Avenue.

Industrial: Late in period or following World War II industrial part developed east of Route 128; enlargement of factories on Highland Avenue at Needham Heights, mostly concrete and brick construction.

XI.

SOURCES

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