

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

PAXTON

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: Paxton

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Located approximately in the center of Worcester County, Paxton is a "hill town" with elevations ranging from 900 feet above sea level in the stream valleys to 1,400 feet on Asnebumskit Hill, one of three hills that form a north-south ridge along the town's eastern border. This ridge separates Holden, which lies at an average elevation of 800-900 feet above sea level, from Paxton, where most of the town's land lies between 1,000 and 1,200 feet above sea level.

Four streams drain the town and flow into three separate drainage systems: Kettle Brook in the southeast drains into the Blackstone basin, Turkey Hill Brook in the northwest and a small stream in the southwest corner drain into the Quaboag River/Chicopee River basin, and a minor stream in the northeast drains into the Quinapoxet/Nashua River basin.

Paxton's soils consist largely of Charlton fine sandy loam, with small areas of Paxton loam on the several drumlins scattered through the town, and a continuation of the Sutton loam found in northern Leicester. All of these soils are among the most important and agriculturally productive in the county. They are particularly well suited to mowing, and also provide good yields of corn and grains, potatoes, and vegetables.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Incorporated as a district from parts of Leicester and Rutland (both established in 1714) in 1765. Part of Rutland added, 1772. Made a town in 1775. Boundary with Holden established in 1793. Parts of Holden annexed in 1804 and 1838. Part annexed to Holden in 1831. Boundary with Rutland established in 1829. Part of Rutland annexed in 1851. Boundary with Holden established in 1906.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

A small, upland, residential suburb of Worcester, on a secondary corridor to the highlands northeast of the Worcester basin, with possible native sites at Asnebumskit Pond and south of Turkey Hill Pond. First European settlement occurs ca. 1720, with dispersed 18th century agricultural settlement, meetinghouse site established by 1767, and subsequent early 19th century growth of small, central village. Farm abandonment and population decline occurs in the 19th and early 20th centuries, with no significant industrial development. Automobile suburb growth, initiated ca. 1920, continues to present, with four-fold population increase since 1945. Significant agricultural landscapes remain northeast of the center village.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes

Highland tributary area northeast of Worcester basin, with possible upland trail from Rutland area ponds to the north (Richards Avenue) continuing south along Kettle Brook (Reservoir Drive) to Towtaid and Tatnuck areas. Possible east branch south of Asnebumskit Pond (Grove Street, then following contours to Holden Road).

B. Settlement Pattern

No sites are reported for the town. However, small sites can be expected in the hilly area used for short-term, small camps primarily near the area's brooks and ponds.

C. Subsistence Pattern

Presumably the area was visited on a short-term basis from larger base camps, primarily during the winter months for hunting and fishing by small bands composed of families or task groups.

V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes

Native trails continue in use.

B. Settlement Pattern

Continuation of the pattern established during the Contact period.

C. Subsistence Pattern

Continuation of the pattern established during the Contact period.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes

Main roads radiating out from Worcester to the northwest county highland towns include Marshall Street in the southwest to New Braintree/Hardwick, and Reservoir Drive-Pleasant Street-Richards Avenue through the meetinghouse center to Rutland. East-west roads connect to Holden (Maple Street-Grove Street-Holden Road), and to Spencer (West Street-South Street-Marshall Street). Secondary roads lead to outlying farms.

B. Population

No figures available due to dependent and district status during this period, but ca. 300 in 1765. Eleven men formed the church in 1767 as Congregational, although there may have been consideration of an Episcopal option (Bill 1889). The town was plagued by difficulties with the ministers, and by short pastorates.

C. Settlement Pattern

The area covered by the town was part of the Leicester eight-mile grant of 1686 and the Rutland twelve-mile grant of 1687, divided by an east-west line that passed to the north of the meetinghouse. Colonial settlement may have begun in the 1720s, but the earliest confirmed settlers were Josiah and Jason Livermore in the southwest from 1748. In 1765, the town became a district and a church was formed two years later. The meetinghouse was located near the Center on the north-south artery, with an adjacent burying ground.

D. Economic Base

Little information available on this primarily agricultural town. Although the elevation is high, the soil provided for good farmland as well as lumbering. A mill was established by 1757.

E. Architecture

Residential: Based on Bush's Landmarks and Memories (1923) and field observations, the center chimney house, of both one and two stories, appears to have been the most common house form. Two double chimney houses, one single story and one two-story, are cited in Bush.

Institutional: First meetinghouse, 50 x 40 feet, erected in 1767.

Commercial: John Snow's tavern was the site of the first town meeting in 1765.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes

Colonial highways continue in use, with the main route north-south through the Center from Worcester to Rutland. A more direct route from Worcester to Barre is established on Mower Street-Pleasant Street, also through the Center.

B. Population

Very little growth in population took place during this period. No figure is available for 1776, but in 1790 the total equalled 558. The total was highest in 1810 at 619, but by 1830 it had fallen to 597. The town's difficulties with their pastor, unspecified, continued during this period. Voluntary associations formed, including the Ladies Reading and Charitable Society (1824) and Young Ladies Literary Society (1825-30).

C. Settlement Pattern

Continued dispersed agricultural settlement, with some linear nucleation along north-south corridor near meetinghouse center.

D. Economic Base

A moderate proportion, 65.6%, of the town's land was unimproved and woodlot in 1784, while 7.3% was classed as unimprovable. A moderate amount was under tillage, 3.0%, was meadow and mowing land, 10.2%, and used as pasturage, 13.9%.

Paxton's economy in the late 18th and early 19th centuries was largely agricultural. Its products included hay, sheep and wool, cattle and meat, potatoes, butter and cheese, corn and other grains. By 1830, the town contained four grist mills, two sawmills, and a triphammer, probably employed in the manufacture of agricultural tools.

The other manufacturing endeavors in the town were the small workshops of such artisans as a chair maker and wheelwright, four boot shops and a tanner and currier. Boot making in a commercial manner was begun in 1820 by John Partridge; by 1832, the four shops employed 31 men and boys. Many households were probably also involved in sewing parts of the 10,000 pairs of boots made the previous year.

E. Architecture

Residential: Very few survivals. Center and double chimney plans and one rear wall chimney plan are recorded.

Institutional: Brick schoolhouse (1820) erected for northwest district.

Commercial: the Paxton Inn in the Center (date?) was originally a two-story, five-bay structure; a third story was added in the late 19th century, and the building now has a center chimney.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes

Early 19th century roads continue in use. No rail connections are established.

B. Population

The largest increase in the town's history prior to post-World War II expansion as a Worcester suburb took place in the early years of this period. From a total of 596 in 1830, the figure increased to 820 in 1850, not surpassed until 1945. Thereafter, the total decreased, to 646 in 1870. Lack of available figures on immigration before 1855 make it impossible to assess the influence of newcomers on that expansion. Figures later, however, show a small portion of foreign-born within the town, 9%, like neighboring, similarly agricultural towns. The Irish were the most numerous within this group, with smaller numbers of Canadians, English, Germans, and Italians. While farming employed increasing numbers in the town, manufacturing occupied only half as many.

Emphasis on self-improvement continued to dominate among the voluntary associations, with the formation of the Band of Hope, which became the Lyceum during the 1860s. The town held some resistance to the abolition of the district system and the concomitant loss of local control over schooling. Still, no new religious groups were formed.

C. Settlement Pattern

Dispersed agricultural settlement continues, with the addition of many small boot shops. Linear extension of center village residences occurs, particularly along the road to Worcester, but also along West and Maple Streets. The meetinghouse is remodelled, and a steeple added in 1835.

D. Economic Base

Without the benefit of a railroad through the town, Paxton experienced little economic growth during this period. Boot and shoe manufacturing and its several small accessory industries became the town's principal business; at its peak, the number of men and women employed in the footwear industries approximately equalled the number who worked at farming, either as owners or laborers. The initial peak in production and employment occurred during the 1850s, a period that coincided with the maximum population of Paxton, not exceeded until the 1940s. In 1855, the town had 850 residents; 95 men and 28 women were employed in the production of 58,100 pairs of boots valued at \$104,000. By 1865, production totalled only 32,000 pairs made by 100 men and women, but worth nearly \$128,000. A tannery and boot box manufactory also operated at this time. In the 1830s, palm-leaf hat making experienced a brief period of popularity; in 1837, 2,000 hats were made in homes by women and girls.

The sawing of lumber and firewood increased in importance through the period. As Worcester experienced its several developmental booms during this period, a portion of its building material and fuel needs were met by Paxton's forests. The amount of lumber cut increased from 121,000 feet in 1845 to more than 600,000 feet in 1865; cords of firewood cut ranged from 1,300 to 1,800 cords annually.

Although the value of Paxton's agricultural products more than tripled between 1845 and 1865 to \$65,000, the amount of acreage cultivated and quantity of goods produced decreased in nearly every category of agricultural goods. Those that increased were the value and amount of poultry and eggs sold, acres devoted to hay, and gallons of milk sold. Butter and cheese remained the major products of the dairy in 1865, as nearly 9,500 lbs. of butter and 2,800 lbs. of cheese were produced. Nevertheless, these had decreased from nearly 16,000 lbs. of butter and 13,000 lbs. of cheese in 1845, as more milk was diverted to sales in the raw state (1,207 gallons in 1865).

E. Architecture

Residential: Very few examples. The gable end, side-passage plan, both one- and two-story houses, appears to have been the most common form. Many are to be found in the Center. A few two-story, double chimney houses and one two-story, end chimney house are recorded. Development appears to have steadily declined during this period; one two-story, double chimney Italianate style dwelling is recorded.

Institutional: In 1835, the meetinghouse was moved from its original site and enlarged. A spire was added. The building appears to have been significantly altered on the interior as well.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes

The 19th century roads continue in use. No streetcar service is established to town from Worcester.

B. Population

Population totals continued to drop throughout the period due to the reduction in what small manufacturing establishments the town formerly had. From 646 in 1870, the number within Paxton dropped to 471 in 1915, with only one five-year period of growth from 1895 to 1900. Not surprisingly, while agricultural employment remained steady at just over 100, manufacturing occupations dropped from 81 males in 1875 to 19 in 1905 and 32 in 1915. At the same time, however, the proportion of foreign-born increased from 9% in 1875 to 20.6% in 1915. The French Canadians increased to be the most numerous until outnumbered by the Finns in 1915. The Irish disappeared altogether, but small numbers of Swedes came to the town. Still no new religious organization was formed in the town. The primary additions to the town's institutions at this time were the formation of the Library in 1877 and the Oraskasco Historical Society in 1896. The town owned the regional poor farm association in 1890. The Lyceum became the Village Improvement Society in 1897, and the town's farmers formed their own Grange in 1912.

C. Settlement Pattern

Little change occurs. A town hall is built in the Center in 1888. A small box factory is functioning by the 1890s north of Streeter Pond near Pine Hill.

D. Economic Base

Paxton's limited manufacturing reached its final economic peak during the 1870s, when production in the town's boot shops reached \$213,000 (1875). Only 68 men were employed in the manufacture of boots in that year; in 1855, when \$104,000 worth of shoes were manufactured, more than 120 men and women were employed. Fire

destroyed the major boot factory in the 1880s and shortly thereafter the remaining shops closed. By 1898, two sawmills, a box factory, a blacksmith, and several stores were among the only shops and industries in the town. Census records also noted the presence of a clothing establishment and a small carriage and wagon manufactory during the 1880s and 1890s.

Despite the "wealth" accumulated by Paxton's several leading boot and shoe makers between the 1830s and 1880s, the town itself shows little evidence of this prosperity. One reason, as noted by a county historian (Hurd 1889:570), is that most manufacturers and their descendants departed the town after the demise of the industry, taking their wealth with them.

Paxton's agricultural production rebounded during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, rising in value from \$69,000 in 1875 to \$116,000 in 1905. This increase was due largely to the expansion of dairying and market gardening (vegetables). Dairying increased from less than 20% of the total in 1875 to 36% in 1905, when more than 277,000 gallons of milk were produced; the value of vegetables raised nearly doubled during the same period.

Despite the increase in production value, the total number of farms and improved acreage decreased. In 1865, 87 farms were recorded; by 1905, the number fell to 74: 13 dairy farms, four market gardens, and 57 mixed crop farms. Improved acreage decreased during this period from 7,713 in 1865 to 5,663 in 1905.

E. Architecture

Residential: No significant development. One late 19th century two-story, four-bay, asymmetrical dwelling with double chimneys and Italianate trim is recorded and said to be "unique in town."

Institutional: The town hall, a two-and-a-half-story, gable end structure with shingled walls, banding, and clipped gables, was built in 1888.

Industrial: A one-story, board and batten mill building survives.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes

The main roads are improved as auto highways by the 1930s, with north-south Route 122 (Worcester to Barre) on Pleasant Street, north-south Route 56 (Leicester to Rutland), and east-west Route 31 (Spencer to Holden).

B. Population

After 65 years of decline, the town finally began to gain population at this time, growing from 471 in 1915 to 791 in 1940. The proportion of foreign-born declined from 20.6% in 1915 to 16.6% in 1940, but no specific breakdowns are available. No

occupations are available, but 33.1% of the population was classified as rural.

C. Settlement Pattern

Some automobile suburb development occurs by period's end, with a possibly notable concentration of immigrant farmer cottages in the Suomi Street area. Pine Hill (ca. 1925) and Kettle Brook #3 reservoirs flood lowland tracts in the northeast and south. The Richards Memorial Library is added to the Center in 1926.

D. Economic Base

Paxton's economy was based almost exclusively on agriculture during this period. Little or no manufacturing took place. Blacksmithing and sawing were probably among the few non-agricultural pursuits carried on within the town's limits. Some residents were probably employed in Worcester or other towns, but the large majority continued to farm.

Agriculture continued in the trends of the early 20th century. Dairying and market gardening remained the two most important activities. Precise statistics on changing land use are lacking, but the trend towards a decrease in cultivated land and increase in woodland continued. Several reservoirs for the city of Worcester, located along Kettle Brook and near Pine Hill, took large sections of the town's land out of active use, protected as watershed land for the reservoirs.

E. Architecture

Residential: Bungalows, found especially along West Street and Pleasant Street, characterize residential growth for the period.

Institutional: A one-story, frame, gable end Roman Catholic church was erected during the first quarter of the 20th century.

Commercial: A 1920s gas station stands in the Center.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

The Inventory is basically sound and, while sparse, reflects the survival rate.

XII. BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bush, Roxa Howard. Landmarks and Memories. 1923.