

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

STERLING

Report Date: 1983

Associated Regional Report: Central Massachusetts

Reconnaissance Survey Town Reports, produced for MHC's Statewide Reconnaissance Survey between 1979 and 1987, introduce the historical development of each of the Commonwealth's municipalities. Each report begins with an historic overview, a description of topography, and political boundaries. For the purposes of the survey, the historic period has been subdivided into seven periods: Contact (1500–1620), Plantation (1620–1675), Colonial (1675–1775), Federal (1775–1830), Early Industrial (1830–1870), Late Industrial (1870–1915), and Early Modern (1915–1940/55). Each report concludes with survey observations that evaluate the town's existing historic properties inventory and highlight significant historic buildings, settlement patterns, and present threats to these resources. A bibliography lists key secondary resources.

Town reports are designed for use together with a series of town maps that demarcate settlement patterns, transportation corridors and industrial sites for each historic period. These maps are in the form of color-coded, polyester overlays to the USGS topographic base map for each town on file and available for consultation at MHC. For further information on the organization and preparation of town reports, readers should contact MHC.

Users should keep in mind that these reports are now two decades or more old. The information they contain, including assessments of existing knowledge, planning recommendations, understanding of local development, and bibliographic references all date to the time they were written. In some cases, information on certain topics was not completed. No attempt has been made to update this information.

Electronic text was not available for digital capture, and as a result most of the reports have been scanned as PDF files. While all have been processed with optical character recognition, there will inevitably be some character recognition errors.

The activity that is the subject of the MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report has been financed in part with Federal funds from the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. However, the contents and opinions do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of the Interior. This program receives Federal financial assistance for identification and protection of historic properties. Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Age Discrimination Act of 1975, as amended, the U.S. Department of the Interior prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, disability or age in its federally assisted programs. If you believe you have been discriminated against in any program, activity or facility as described above, or if you desire further information please write to: Office of Equal Opportunity, National Park Service, 1849 C Street, N.W., Washington, D.C., 20240.



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MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

DATE: 1983

COMMUNITY: Sterling

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Lying on the eastern slope of the central highlands plateau, Sterling's surface rises from a relatively flat plain in the east at 400-500 feet above sea level to a height of over 1,000 feet in the hilly northwest corner of the town. Just beyond its western border, Mt. Wachusett, the highest hill in the central highlands, rises to 2,000 feet.

One major river, the Stillwater, crosses the south and west sides of town and a number of sizeable brooks flow out of the hills. Concentrated mostly in the northern half of town along Bailey Brook, Wekepeke Brook, and Justice Brook, they provided numerous sites for small water powered mills and shops.

The low relatively flat area south and west of Pratts Junction was once the bed of glacial Lake Nashua, and the alluvial deposits of bedded sands and silty loam provide excellent farmland. The hilly northwest corner, composed of stoney till and terrace deposits is largely wooded and well suited to orchards.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Eastern part included in Nashaway grant in 1643. Most territory included in Chocksett grant of 1701. Established as a town, from part of Lancaster, 1781. Bounds established with Lancaster, 1793. Part included in new town of West Boylston, 1808. Part of Lancaster annexed, 1837. Bounds with Lancaster established in 1908.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

An agricultural and suburban central uplands town on the historic corridors to the western and northwestern highlands. Native site of regional significance documented at Waushacum Ponds. European settlement ca. 1720 in Rowley Hill area. Dispersed, upland agricultural settlement, which continues to present with orchards and dairying. Dispersed 19th century small-scale industry, primarily woodworking. Major 19th century industry, pottery works at West Sterling. Small village develops at meetinghouse center by early 19th century. Significant, but deteriorating remnants of late 19th century Methodist cottage cluster at Sterling Campgrounds. Notable surviving farmsteads on Redstone Hill/Kendall Hill, Rowley Hill/Ross Hill, and Justice Hill. Widespread deterioration of 19th century dairy barns. Continued suburban development likely with completion of I-190 corridor, with exurban sites on western hilltops with views of Mt. Wachusett.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Two primary east-west routes from the "wading place" over the Nashua in Lancaster: bearing north Hill Road to North Row, through the Center Restone Hill to Princeton Road; bearing to the south toward present Wachusett Reservoir, Fitch Road. North-south routes toward confluence of Stillwater and Quinepoxet in West Boylston: Redemption Rock Road; Bean-Jewett joins Princeton, then splits, following Meetinghouse Hill Road to the north, and Rowley Hill Road to the northeast, by ponds.

B. Settlement Patterns:

The primary seat of the Nashaway group of Nipmuck, and then mid 17th century leader Sholan, located between and around East and West Waushaccum Ponds. Here, repeated or long-term camps, while surrounding areas exploited from this base.

C. Subsistence Patterns:

This area was the site of activities associated with more permanent camps, gathering larger groups for fishing in the ponds, Stillwater and nearby Nashua Rivers, as well as horticulture on adjacent knolls.

D. Observations:

Early contact with this group makes it well known, and sources unanimous on village location, but no reported finds there.

V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Continuation of Native trails.

B. Settlement Patterns:

Nashaways number 15-16 families totalling ca. 200 individuals, reduced in number by small pox (1622) and Mokawk wars (1660s). This area located adjacent to grant by Sholan to colonials in 1643. By the end of the period, some natives interested in Christianity, while other of Sholan's descendants joined in King Philip's War. Unincorporated by provincial authorities, and no colonial settlement.

C. Subsistence Patterns:

Continued, but reduced, use as during Contact period.

IV. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Continuation of Native trails.

B. Settlement Patterns:

Nashaways number 15-16 families totalling ca. 200 individuals, reduced in number by smallpox (1633) and Mohawk wars (1660s). This area located adjacent to grant by Sholan to colonials in 1643. By the end of the period, some natives interested in Christianity, while other of Sholan's descendants joined in King Phillip's War. Unincorporated by provincial authorities, and no colonial settlement.

C. Subsistence Patterns:

Continued, but reduced, use as during Contact period.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Primary east-west route continues to follow Restone Hill and Princeton Roads, passing through the town center. Redemption Hill Road important artery to Boylston, as Kendall Hill, Sweat Hill and Spring Hill Roads in the southeast and the vicinity of the older Fitch Pond route. Meetinghouse Hill and Beaman Roads leaf from center to primary mill sites; the latter joined to Rowley Hill Road by South Nelson and Good Roads.

B. Population:

First five settlers ca. 1720; 16 male and 5 female Lancaster church members released to form second parish in 1742; dysentery epidemic of 1756 took 42, 1 in 20, in eight weeks; in 1764, 156 dwellings and 856 inhabitants; by 1778, 200 families in the parish, was nearly greater than parent parish. Sale of share by Lancaster proprietors to outsiders brought objection from town but was overridden. This brought settlers from Rowley and Woburn. Church members remove minister from pulpit in 1774 in a dispute over ministerial authority, not cooperating with his parish's wishes; separate for ten years.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Unincorporated by provincial authorities until 1711, when assigned to neighboring Lancaster. In 1701, George Tahanto, a Sholan descendant and part of the Nipmuck remnant after King Philip's War, sold to a group from Lancaster. These proprietors divided the land among themselves as subscribers, granting 40 acres per share; it was not added to the common lands of its parent town. First settlement focused on the hills west of the town center, 1720. Meetinghouse, stables, and school located on three acres in

Center in 1742; first residence there in 1759-60. Continual attempts for complete independence from establishment of parish (1742) to town incorporation (1781) resisted by Lancaster due to the wealth of Woonchaucksett's citizens and the expand of bridge maintenance; "Choxett war" waged in town meetings by the "irrepressible" Gamaliel Beamen.

D. Economic Base:

As part of the town of Lancaster, shared its dominant role within the county. Sterling area more agricultural, however, consisting primarily of dispersed farmsteads. By parent town's testimony, residents here wealthier, probably due to continuance of farm economy here, while commerce and industry developed in the east. Mills located at Morre's Corner, on Rocky Brook at Beaman Road, on Wekepeke Brook near North Row, and on Pratt's Pond. Mid century, mine between the Waushaccum Ponds.

E. Architecture:

Residential: First settlement consisted of five families from Lancaster in 1720; by 1764, 156 dwellings are recorded in the "Chocksett" section. No houses constructed in the Center until ca. 1760. Two-story center chimney plan is predominant house form. Few double chimney houses recorded. A "score" of two-story center chimney dwellings with lean-tos are listed as still existing in 1889 (Hurd).

Institutional: First meetinghouse (48 x 38 feet) erected in 1742. Schoolhouse built 1743 and town others shortly thereafter.

Commercial: One tavern recorded from ca. 1720, likely more and possibly a store by the end of the period.

Industrial: Saw grist mills and tannery; boot and shoe manufacturing likely late in period.

VIII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

The colonial road network remains in use, with a set of main and secondary routes radiating from Sterling Center. By the 1790s, at least five highways cross town: and east/west route from Princeton and beyond to Lancaster and Boston (Princeton Road, Redstone Hill Road); a north/south highway from Leominster (Meetinghouse Hill Road, Legate Hill Road) to West Boylston to Lancaster (Fitch Pond Road); a road from Westminister and northwest county to West Boylston, Boylston, and Northborough (Redemption Rock Trail); and a second road from Westminster that branches to Sterling Center (Justice Hill Road, Rowley Hill Road, Kilbourne Road), or South Lancaster (North Row Road, Flanagan Hill Road).

B. Population:

Population part of Lancaster to 1781. Population 1,428 in 1790, increases to 1,614 in 1800. Decrease in 1810 (1,492) after 31 families lost in formation of West Boylston in 1808. Increase to 1830 (1,794). Period of greatest growth 1810-1820 (+238). Dysentery epidemic in 1796; eight children die. Whitney (1793) refers to Sterling as a "large, prosperous, and wealthy town." Second meetinghouse built in 1799. Town house (first in county?) built 1802-3. Baptists active in town after 1819. Poorfarm purchased in 1822. Sterling Mutual Improvement Society (later Sterling Luceum) formed in 1822. Winter fuel fund for females of limited means established, 1825.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Whitney (1793) notes a "large collection of tradesmen and mechanics" in the center village. Second meetinghouse built in 1799, on site of first house. Town house built 1802-3. Settlement still primarily dispersed, with a dozen dwellings in the center by 1830. Upland agricultural settlement most intense in Rowley Hill and Restone Hill/Kendall Hill areas.

D. Economic Base:

Though agriculture was the basis of Sterling's economy as it entered the 19th century, its rich forests provided almost unlimited resources to the growing number of chair manufacturers who located in the town. By 1820, 23 chair makers produced more than 68,000 chairs. Seven sawmills in 1830 provided materials for these and other woodworking industries such as the manufacture of curved scythe snathes, improved and patented by Silas Lamson of Sterling, and a window blind maker. A hat maker produced 15,000 hats per year worth \$30,000.

Three palm-leaf hat manufactories employing 70 women, two shoe shops, a wheelwright, and a tanner and currier joined the fifteen chair makers still working in 1832. An earthenware pottery was established in West Sterling in 1820 on the site of an earlier brick pit, which continued with the pottery. Two brickmakers worked this and another yard in the town.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Center chimney prevails as most popular house form with several one-story examples recorded and one two-story, four-bay center chimney plan. The double chimney form is more visible, mostly all of five bays; one four-bay recorded and two brick double pile plans with frame gable ends at the attic level. At least four end chimney houses are known. In 1790, town had 209 dwellings, and by the end of the period there were 256.

Institutional: Second meetinghouse (1799): Timothy Hildred, carpenter. Town house (1801) indicates early separation of civic and religious affairs. Eight school districts are organized in 1799 and new buildings erected in each district. Universalists begin meeting in 1830.

Commercial: Three taverns and five stores are recorded for the period.

Industrial: Two significant local industries: manufacture of chairs (ten establishments) and production of palm-leaf hats (Rice and Blood Har shop occupied a two-story, nine-bay gabled building). Typical array of saw and grist mills, two shingle, and a brick mill and a tannery.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

The local road network remains in use. By 1870, three railroad lines provide service: the Fitchburg and Worcester (1845) through Sterling Junction, Sterling Center, and Pratts Junction; the Worcester and Nashua (1848) through Sterling Junction and the southeastern part of town; the Boston Clinton, and Fitchburg (1866) through the northeastern part of town and Pratts Junction.

B. Population:

Population decreases slightly 1830-1840, then increases to a period peak in 1860 (1881). Population then drops to 1865 (1,668) and remains stable to 1870 (1,670). Foreign-born population 7% in 1865. Second town hall built 1835. Some diversification of religious denominations. Universalists organize 1836, build church 1837, meet until 1853. Baptist and Orthodox Congregationalists organized evangelical preaching in 1836. Baptist society organizes 1837, church built 1843. Third Congregational meetinghouse built 1842, after fire destroys second house. First Evangelical Society organizes 1851, buys Universalist Church in 1852. Methodist Campground established 1852. Farmers Club organized 1857. Lyceum active through 1860s.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Continued growth in Sterling Center, particularly after railroad connections are established in 1845. A number of secondary centers also emerge during the period. The center continues as the civic focus, with second town hall (1835), Universalist meetinghouse (1837), third Congregational meetinghouse (1843). Main Street remains the commercial focus. Small shops and factories are scattered throughout the center by 1870. By this time, the mixed residential/light manufacturing area has spread southwest on Worcester Road and three blocks southeast of Main Street along Pine, School and Bird Streets. Two small high-income corridors emerge on Maple Street southeast of the railroad tracks, and Pleasant Street (Princeton Street) west of the civic center.

West Sterling develops as a secondary manufacturing center with the development of Snow and Coolidge pottery works ca. 1850 (?). Numerous other small shop/mill hamlets grew around small water power sites throughout town, the largest at Pratts Junction. Sterling Methodist Camp Meeting Grounds established in 1852, south of West Waushaccum Pond, first with tents, later with summer cottages.

D. Economic Base:

Woodworking and lumbering continued to dominate Sterling's industry, providing more than 60% of the town's manufacturing value during this period. From a high of 34 chair and cabinetmakers in 1845, employing 84 men and boys, the number decreased to 4, employing 22, in 1865. More than one million board feet of lumber and over 400,000 staves, lathes, shingles, and clapboards were cut in the eight sawmills operating in 1865; 1,525 cords of firewood were cut that year also.

Brickmaking and the manufacture of stone and earthenware pottery continued in West Sterling. At the Wachusett Pottery utilitarian wares such as crocks, lard pots, jars, milk bowls, pitchers, and bean pots were made along with fancy pressed ware with "Rockingham" glaze. Palm leaf hat manufacture, employing 225 women in 1845 in the production of 112,400 hats, provided labor to 400 women in 1855 before ceasing in the 1860s. In 1855, ten million needles were manufactured at a needle factory in Sterling Center.

The leather industry was also important in Sterling, tied closely to the large numbers of cattle and swine on the town's farms. A tannery and currying establishment were sustained through the period. Harness making and shoe manufacture were present in several small shops.

The manufacture of boy's and girl's clothing was begun in the 1850s by Ebenezer Butterick. In addition to clothing he sold paper patterns for the clothiers. This was the origin of a large pattern business still known by the name Butterick Patterns.

By 1865, Sterling's agricultural products were valued at nearly twice the value of its manufacturers. Butter production, initially encouraged by marketmen who began to make weekly wagon trips to Boston by 1820, reached 75,000 lbs. in 1845 before it was cut in half with the introduction of the railroad and the possibility of milk sales to Boston. In 1865, 83,812 gallons of milk were sold and the number of milk cows increased to 841. The raising of much hay and grains supported large numbers of cattle, sheep, and swine. 184,758 lbs. of beef, 83,000 lbs. of pork and 34,000 lbs. of veal were dressed in 1865. Apple orchards numbered 18,000 trees in 1855 and small crops of hops and tobacco were cultivated in the 1860s. A Farmer's Club was begun in 1857 and held its first cattle show in 1859.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Major house type recorded for the period is the side-passage plan, in the greater number of two-story examples, and all being three bays. Of note is the Greek Revival side-passage (1842) with one-story Doric portico and corner pilasters built by John Springer, local carpenter. One two-story gable end center entrance plan is recorded as is one brick double chimney Georgian plan, and a one-story, three-bay double chimney Gothic building with a central gable and barge board (1847-49).

Institutional: Second town hall is erected (1835): two-story three-bay Greek temple front by John Springer. Universalist meetinghouse (1837): Greek temple from (?); Baptist Meetings held (1837) and building erected in 1843; Evangelical Congregational Society formed in 1851 and purchased 1837 meetinghouse from disbanded Universalists (1853). By end of the period, there are eleven school districts.

Commercial: Railroads come to Sterling: Worcester and Nashua (1848), Fitchburg and Worcester (1850) and Agricultural Line (1866).

By the end of the period there is usual assortment of groceries, dry goods, etc., and a hotel.

Industrial: Major local industries remain chair (Pratts Junction) and hat (Blood and Rice) manufacturing with the introduction of the Wachusett Pottery in West Sterling in 1837 (no buildings exist) which produced earthenware in its early years and expanded into flowerpots. Apple growing with subsequent cider mills and coopering.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

The 19th century road and rail network continues in use. In 1906, service is opened on the north-south Worcester and Sterling Street Railway to Fitchburg (essentially along present Route 12, west of Sterling and through Sterling Center).

B. Population:

Decrease in population from 1870 (1,670) to a period low in 1895 (1,218). Irregular increase to 1915 (1,403). 85 Irish, 28 Canadians, 7 English present in 1875. 72 Irish, 34 Nova Scotians, 13 English, 12 French Canadians, 9 English Canadians present in 1885. 97 Irish, 71 Nova Scotians, 53 English, 37 French Canadians, 31 English Canadians, 29 New Brunswickers, 25 Danes, 22 Swedes, and several other groups present in 1905. Roman Catholic population 31 families in 1886. Spiritualist group in 1880s. Four-year high school established in 1883. Library built 1885. Grange established 1874. Twenty-six room almshouse built in 1877.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Little residential expansion anywhere in town, though some infilling occurs in Sterling Center.

Civic changes and additions occur in Center in 1880s, including high school (1883), library (1885), remodelling of third meetinghouse (1886). G.A.R. and Grange Halls in use by 1890s. Also by 1890s, cottages, and halls owned by churches in several Worcester County communities. Fire destroys fifty campground buildings, 1914. Waushacum Park recreational center established on East Pond in 1879. Worcester Boy's Club camp established on

West Pond, 1889. Sterling avoids major settlement disruption by Wachusett Reservoir construction (ca 1895-1905). Earth dike constructed as part of reservoir system in southeast.

D. Economic Base:

Agriculture and woodworking remained the basis of Sterling's economy. Chairs, lumber, axe halves, refrigerators, baskets, carts, and carpentry accounted for nearly half of the total manufactured goods throughout the period.

The production of earthenware pottery prospered during the 1870s, as 20 hands were employed. Art wares such as rustic garden seats, vases and window boxes were produced for a short period in the 1870s, but proved too expensive to make. In 1887, an emery wheel manufacturing was added and soon replaced pottery-making. After its removal to Ohio in 1892, fancy glazed and antique pottery was produced for a few years before the pottery was permanently closed in 1896 and the buildings razed.

Pistols were manufactured for a short while in Sterling Center during the 1870s. However, by the early 20th century, only several chair makers, harness makers, ice houses and gristmills remained.

By 1889, milk was the principal farm product, valued at \$100,000 annually. Regular daily shipments to Boston began in 1886 and milk production reached a peak in 1912 at 15,000 quarts per day.

The first MacIntosh apple trees were planted in 1899, and over the next two decades most of the large orchards were planted with this variety of apple. A large-scale cider mill was established in 1915 by the Hildrick Corporation.

E. Architecture:

Residential: One Colonial revival house. Little apparent development.

Institutional: Two-story frame almshouse built in 1877. Two-story brick Victorian Gothic library (1885). Town hall enlarged in 1893. Federated Church formed from Union of Baptists and Evangelical Congregationalists (1914) using Evangelical Congregational church building.

Industrial: Primarily an agricultural town with major industry being dairying. Wachusett Pottery becomes Sterling Emery Wheel Company (1880s) and sold out of state shortly thereafter.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Streetcar line abandoned by 1920s and local roads are improved as automobile highways. By 1925 Route 12 is in use as north/south highway from Worcester to Fitchburg, and highway runs from

Sterling Center to Clinton (Route 62). By the mid 1930s, Route 62 is extended west to Princeton, and the Oakdale-West Sterling-Westminster Road is improved (Redemption Rock Trail-Route 64-later Routes 140).

B. Population:

Population increases irregularly over the period from 1915 (1,403) to 1940 (1,613), with a period low in 1920 (1,305).

C. Settlement Patterns:

No major changes during this period.

D. Economic Base:

Dairying continued to expand and became the leading economic activity in the town. By 1930, 126 dairy farms produced milk worth \$200,000 and supplied Brookline, Boston, Brockton, Norwood, Leominster, Clinton and Worcester; the latter had become the main market, serviced by truck delivery. Poultry raising and apple orchards also expanded. In 1930, 9 large poultry farms sold over 500 dozen eggs per week. Nearly 30,000 apple trees had been planted by 1930, yielding more than 75,000 bushels of apples worth \$100,000.

The lumber industry also continued to hold an important position as several lumber companies bought large tracts of woodland, set up portable steam or gas-powered sawmills, and then resold the land after harvesting the timber.