

# MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

## STOW

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: March, 1890

COMMUNITY: Stow

## I. TOPOGRAPHY

Located on hilly, occasionally rugged upland terrain. Several prominent elevations throughout town. Areas of exposed bedrock and evidence of glacial scouring and outwash action. A gravelly to rocky soil. One large and several small ponds, plus numerous streams draining highland sections--all flow into Assabet River which meanders through southern third of town. Large areas of upland bog/swamp between prominent elevations.

## II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Area known as "Pompositticut" during mid-17th century. Incorporated as Town of Stow, 1683. Formation of new towns resulted in several boundary changes and diminished size; these included Harvard (1732), Boxborough (1783), Hudson (1866) and Maynard (1871).

## III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Rural colonial town on historic axis to central uplands. Native site potential along Assabet River and Pomositticut Hill (Maynard). Early frontier of settlement between Concord and Lancaster with town center formation by late 17th century along main western highway. Primarily agricultural economy during Colonial period with well-preserved 18th century landscape in north portion of town including period houses. Limited industrial development around Assabet Falls at Gleasonville during mid-19th century with wide range of period structures including brick mill and residential housing along main street. Town center retained village scale through 20th century with landmark civic buildings of various periods. Recent growth of suburban development from metropolitan Boston has remained modest, preserving historic structures, although continuing pressure is expected in the future along regional highways.

## IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

### A. Transportation Routes:

Located along Assabet River at edge of interior highland. Regional trails follow E/W routes around Elizabeth (Assabet) Brook conjectured as the Great Road (Route 117) with former loops at Bolton Road and Crescent Street through Stow center and possible branches including Summer Street (Maynard), W. Acton, Boxboro and Harvard Roads to north. Southern routes along Assabet may follow axis of Wheeler/Gleasondale Road and likely trail northside along Assabet River through Golf Course with parallel trail on south side along Road through Natick Reservation.

### B. Settlement Pattern:

No documented sites, however, artifacts reported from several areas notably around Gleasondale and the north end of Boons Pond. Sites also likely on

well drained terraces and knolls along Assabet River (especially at rifts and confluence points), Assabet Brook and adjacent to ponds.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

An important area for seasonal fish runs in Assabet. Possible that evidence of weirs remains. Ample hunting/gathering potential as well as limited agriculture--references to "Indian planting fields" by early settlers.

D. Observations:

Little information currently available. Density of sites down river (Concord) suggests similar pattern for this area. Nevertheless, period occupation probably was light and related to inland people (Nipmuck) rather than to coastal tribes. No European contact materials known from area.

V. FIRST PERIOD SETTLEMENT (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails remain basic route network with highway to Lancaster Road (Route 117) as primary E/W road by mid-17th century.

B. Population:

Possibly some remaining native inhabitants. A small number of colonial settlers; perhaps 15 families by end of period. Most from Concord.

C. Settlement:

First settler, Matthew Boon, on west side of Boon Hill, 1660. Additional settlement along Great Road after 1670. Twelve house lots granted in Lower Village area, 1672, but questionable how many were occupied.

D. Economic Base:

Subsistence agriculture and hunting.

E. Observations:

The last major piece of "unassigned" land in this section of frontier--Concord/Marlborough to north/south, Sudbury/Lancaster to east/west. Rather rugged frontier conditions discouraged more extensive settlement.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1676-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Formation of town center along Great Road by early 18th century forms radial highway network including West Acton, Boxboro, Packard-Taylor, Hudson and Gleasondale Roads, with Red Acre Road from Lower Village and Sudbury-Boon-Randall-Walcott Roads across southern portion of town. Great Road (Route 117) remains primary highway to interior through town center.

B. Population:

Slow development during 17th century. In 1686 tax rolls listed 37 people. Gradual growth during 18th century. Census of 1765 listed 794 inhabitants in 135 families and 121 houses (this includes portions of Boxborough, Hudson and Maynard).

C. Settlement:

Abandoned during King Philip's War; resettlement began 1680. First meetinghouse built, 1685, on east end of common in Lower Village. Minister's house raised close by, 1687; doubled as garrison house. Second, larger meetinghouse built, 1711, on west side of Minister's Pond. This shift resulted in two village centers: Stow Center (where third meetinghouse was built, 1754) and Lower Village (where cemetery was). Third village emerged on Assabet, Gleasondale (Rocky Bottom), during early decades of 18th century. Scattered farms throughout town, especially after threat of Indian raids lessened. No schools built until after 1760.

D. Economic Base:

Agriculture and grazing; dairying and orchards as secondary specialties. Some tanning. Milling on Assabet at Gleasondale--saw and probably grist mill by 1735. Some taverns reported along Great Road but little specific information available.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Earliest description of a house (c. 1683-Parsonage) is of a central-chimney 1/2 cottage with a lean-to rear entry; however, few (if any) cottages appear to remain from this period. By far the largest number of houses associated with the period are central-chimney and twin-chimney two-story structures with symmetrical center entrance facades. A small number of central-chimney houses exist with 1/2 and 3/4 facades.

F. Observations:

Somewhat less desirable topography resulted in slower development than in adjacent towns like Marlborough. Area prospered after stabilization of frontier in early 18th century. Sources are generally poor.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Colonial highways remain in place with improvement of Great Road (Route 117) in early 19th century as E/W highway.

B. Population:

Increased population after 1810 due mainly to growth of mills at Assabet (now Maynard) and Rocky Bottom (now Gleasondale); Methodist Episcopal Society formed at Gleasondale, 1821; no foreign-born population likely.

C. Settlement Location:

Gleasondale, along Great Road between Lower Village and Packard Road, and scattered farm steads.

D. Economic Base:

Principally an agricultural economy through manufacture of textiles begun at Rock Bottom (now Gleasondale). Tanning and brewing also practiced. Jonathan Newell had small machine shop where he is believed to have invented a nail cutting machine.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Vernacular types of preceding remained popular; Federalist style introduced c. 1800-1820; largest number of buildings in this style were 2-story houses with rear-wall chimneys and symmetrical center-entrance facades; a small number of cottages were built using a rear-wall chimney plan. Decorative details of the period were generally confined to simple late Georgian and Federalist style doorways; however, a small body of Federalist (provincial) high-style existed along the Great Road between the Lower Village and Stow Center (approximately 6 buildings), in addition to one possible country estate (Randall Street). Possible wooden row houses (boarding houses) at Gleasondale.

Institutional:

First Parish Meetinghouse built 1827, Methodist meetinghouse built of brick at Gleasondale, 1827, appearances unknown. 5 school districts in existence through most of period (one now in Maynard) with possible exception of 1803-1811 when as many as 11 school districts may have been active; one-room school houses built throughout period, several of brick c. 1810-25; town work house built 1788, poor farm bought-1828. Private academy established one-story Federalist style school house built 1823; private boarding school for girls in operation prior to 1830.

Commercial:

Few exclusively commercial structures built; 2 stores at Lower Village by 1816; first store at Center, 1823; first store at Gleasondale, 1830, appearances unknown.

Industrial:

Mill at Gleasondale, 3 stores, pitched roof, built c. 1820-25.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highways remain from early 19th century with branch railroad along Assabet from Maynard to Hudson (1851), now abandoned.

B. Population:

Most population increases for period probably reflect growth of Maynard (Assabet village), small increases likely at Gleasondale, c. 1850-60; small foreign-born population, mainly Irish and English. Universalist Society present, 1830-1850; Evangelical Society formed 1839, disbanded 1850s.

C. Settlement Location:

Same as in preceding period, although relatively greater focus on Gleasondale.

D. Economic Base:

State offer of a silkworm bounty sparks unsuccessful effort to raise silk worms in the 1840s. Expansion of Gleasondale mill after fire in 1852. Box factory begun in Assabet Brook (still extant).

E. Architecture

Residential:

Extremely little high-style present; most examples of period are side-hall houses and cottages of simple Greek Revival/Italianate design located at Gleasondale and on scattered farms. Most elaborate examples present were located at Gleasondale and Center, and included individual examples of Carpenter Gothic and Greek Revival styles, derived from pattern books. Several examples of Second Empire style were built either at the end of this period or in the early 1870s.

Institutional:

Greek Revival style meetinghouse (1847) and town hall (1840s) transitional Greek Revival/Italianate style Methodist meetinghouse (1853); Evangelical meetinghouse (1840), appearance unknown; 5 school districts during most of period, private schools passed out of existence by c. 1845-50.

Commercial:

Hotels/inns passed out of existence as major lines of transportation were diverted to other towns; several stores located in town's 3 villages (appearances unknown).

Industrial:

Brick mill (elements of Greek Revival style) built at Gleasondale, 1853, four stories high with a pitched roof; elsewhere, primarily wood-frame artisan/workshops.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Road and rail system remains from mid-19th century with street railway line from Maynard to Hudson in early 1900s through Stow center along Great Road and Gleasondale Road with private way around Lambert Hill (portions remain visible).

B. Population:

Fluctuation in 903-1045 range until 1905-1915 when small, permanent increase occurred; foreign-born population increase to a peak in 1905, largest group were Nova Scotian, English and Irish; Union Evangelical Society formed at Stow Center, 1892.

C. Settlement Location:

Little growth of settled area during period; small suburban growth from Maynard in eastern part of Stow c. 1900-1915.

D. Economic Base:

Apples and agricultural products remain principal economic industry. Continued expansion of Gleasondale mill. No other significant activity.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Extremely few examples of high-style, restricted mainly to several Second Empire style houses and several ambitious Queen Anne style houses at Gleasondale. Modest cottages and houses, Queen Anne style and early 20th century eclectic existed in the vicinity of the Lower Village.

Institutional:

Small chapel built for Evangelical Society (1892-13), followed by construction of wood-frame Gothic church (1904-05), Queen Anne style Methodist Church at Gleasondale (1898). Public buildings included Queen Anne style library (1892) and 6-room Colonial Revival style school house at Center (1909), centralization and grading of schools probable near end of period; Red Acre farm established (1902) as retirement home for horses.

Commercial:

4-story (resort?) hotel built 1877-78, burned 1883; several small stores probably located in villages, appearances unknown--unlikely to have been more than one- or two-story frame structures with little decorative trim; railroad depot at Gleasondale only (?).

Industrial:

Wood-frame shoe shop and cabinet shop at Gleasondale, 1870s; expansion of brick mill with utilitarian style brick building c. 1900.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Abandonment of rail and trolley routes in 1920s with autohighway improvements of existing roads including E/W Route 117 (Great Road) and N/S Route 62 (Gleasondale Road) through Stow center.

B. Population:

Very small permanent increase at end of period.

C. Settlement Location:

Same pattern as preceding period except for resort development at Boons Pond.

D. Economic Base:

No new industries; decline in agricultural production toward end of period.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Few examples evident, no high-style likely; extremely simple houses and cottages (some Bungalow-style details) in eastern part of town; rustic cabins built for resort use.

Institutional:

Full centralization of school system evident; new 4-room school house (Colonial Revival style) built at center, 1929.

Commercial:

Resort development in mid-1920s, golf club established (1920), Assabet Lodge (cabins and central pavillion) at Lower Village (1925), cabins at Boon's Pond (1920s), farm stands (1920s) and automobile garage (1920s).

Industrial:

No growth.

XI. SOURCES

Cromwell, Olivia, Stow, Massachusetts, 1683-1933 (1933)