

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

TOWNSEND

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: Townsend

I. TOPOGRAPHY

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Established as a town in 1732 from "North Town" part of Turkey Hills grant of 1719. Northern boundary set by Province Line established in 1741, resulting in loss of a third of the town's territory. Part included in new town of Ashby in 1767.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Townsend is a residential community on the eastern edge of the Central Uplands, on the Squannacook River corridor, with possible native sites at Vinton Pond in the southwest. First European settlement occurs ca. 1728 in the east, with early highland agricultural settlement on Nissequassick (Townsend) Hill, and 1734 mill site at Townsend Harbor on the Squannacook River. Hilltop meetinghouse site is established by 1730. Dispersed agricultural settlement continues through the 18th century, with the addition of western Squannacook milling center at West Townsend, and a third milling focus between West Townsend and Townsend Harbor (later Townsend Center) in 1787. Early 19th-century turnpike traffic stimulates linear growth at all three villages, with major growth at the Townsend Center turnpike junction, where the meetinghouse is relocated in 1804. Small-scale local tanning and coopering activities of the late 18th century expand through the 19th and early 20th centuries into leatherboard and barrel-making industries with national markets, particularly after mid 19th-century rail connections along the Squannacook corridor. Granite quarrying is undertaken in the northwest in the late 19th century. Modern suburban development, though widespread, has concentrated south of Townsend Harbor in the east. Representative 18th- and early 19th-century farmhouses remain, with concentrations at South Row and Townsend Hill, and surviving agricultural landscapes in the northeast and on Baker Hill. Townsend Harbor survives as a Federal turnpike/milling cluster with significant mid 18th-century elements. West Townsend remains largely intact as a mid 19th-century linear village. Townsend Center, while retaining much of its 19th-century structure and its relocated 18th-century meetinghouse, has seen more intensive modern development and alteration, with major commercial and industrial development to the east along Route 119.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes

East/west Squannacook River corridor, with conjectured trail south of river in east along abandoned road to Shirley Road-Turner Road-Warren Road-Harbor Road to river crossing. Trail then

follows Spaulding Road to join Proctor Road trail inferred from Nashua River. Trail continues northwest on Wallace Hill Road, then along southern slope of Townsend Hill to Highland Street-Meadow Road-Brookline Road-Dudley Road to West Townsend river crossing. Conjectured western trail then continues on Main Street to Wheeler Road route along Willard Brook corridor into Ashby highland area. Alternate east/west trail south to Squannacook conjectured as Harbor Road to abandoned road-Bayberry Hill Road-Vinton Pond Road past Vinton Pond.

B. Settlement Pattern

Like so many other towns in the north of central Massachusetts, no archaeological sites are reported. The area is primarily upland with a major waterway, the Squannacook River, running across the center, with tributary brooks, Trout, Witch, Bayberry Hill, Pearl Hill in the south, Wolf, and several unnamed in the south; sites should be located adjacent to these. Density should be low, and visits short-term in this area, particularly considering its location adjacent to a border area between the Nipmuck and the eastern Massachusetts lands.

C. Subsistence Pattern

Groups came to this area for seasonal hunting and fishing, within a pattern of movement from base camps, in Lancaster to the south.

V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes

Contact period trails continue in use.

B. Settlement Pattern

A continuation of patterns established during the Contact period with some reduction due to colonial presence is predicted for this area.

C. Subsistence Pattern

A continuation of patterns established during the Contact period.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes

Native trails are improved as local roads. Main east/west road from Groton is established along the Squannacook River corridor as Main Street-Wheeler Road. Roads from Lunenburg to the south connect to Townsend Harbor (Warren Road), the meetinghouse center (Seaver Road-South Row Road-Meetinghouse Hill Road), and West Townsend (Lunenburg Road).

B. Population

Few figures are available for the early years of the town's history. The proprietors of the grant came primarily from Concord, with large numbers also coming from Woburn, Billerica, Groton, and Chelmsford; however, as in other proprietary towns, only 1/9 of these actually settled. The first settler, John Pat, came in 1728. Six years later when the church was gathered, 16 men signed the covenant. The minister they called was a follower of Jonathan Edwards, but critical of the extremes of some New Light preachers that caused problems in neighboring parishes of Dunstable, Concord, and Chelmsford. At least one of the settlers, Wallace, was Scots-Irish. In 1764 the town's population equalled 598; twelve years later it had expanded to 794.

C. Settlement Pattern

The first colonial claim to land now Townsend was a grant of the General Court in 1676 to William Hathorn, measuring one square mile at Nissequassick, now Townsend Hill. Later, in 1719, this area and Lunenburg to the south were laid out as two new towns of six miles square, available to 80 proprietors each for five pounds. The first divisions of land took place during 1720, of 50-acre house lots; later divisions took place in 1723, 1724, 1733, and each successively further west from the Groton line. The meetinghouse was located near the center of this eastern portion of the grant, and a one-acre burying ground was purchased nearby. Fortified houses for defense were located near the harbor, west of South Row Road, west of the meetinghouse, and west of West Townsend, on hills. Incorporation came in 1732. A long controversy with neighboring Dunstable was resolved by the running of the Province Line in 1741, which took some one-third of the town's land for New Hampshire.

D. Economic Base

Townsend is classified by Pruitt for 1771 as an Egalitarian Farm Town, with low corn production and agrarian prosperity, low propertylessness and agrarian poverty, low community wealth, and moderate commercial development. A sawmill was established at the Harbor by John Stevens and John Pat in 1733, and a grist mill was added shortly thereafter.

E. Architecture

Residential: A relatively small number of datable Colonial period houses appear to survive in Townsend. The most common form is the two-story, five-bay, center chimney house. One two-story, double chimney house was observed, and a single-story, three-bay, center chimney house is recorded.

Institutional: First meetinghouse (35 x 45 feet) built on hill one mile northeast of common in 2730. Second meetinghouse erected 1771 here on same site.

Voted, but did not build, schoolhouse (18 x 23 feet), 1746.
Reference to school building, 1749.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes

The Colonial roadways continue in use, with the addition of the Third New Hampshire Turnpike extension (1801) from the state line to Townsend Center (Turnpike Road), and the improvement of the Squannacook corridor route as part of the Ashby Turnpike (incorporated 1806, opened 1811) through West Townsend to Townsend Center (turnpike Road-Main Street).

B. Population

The population of the town continued to grow throughout this period, from 794 in 1776 to 1,506 in 1830, a near doubling. In 1818, four in the town formed a Baptist society, which became a church in 1827 with twelve communicants. At the same time, the number of Unitarians within the Congregational First Parish was increasing, and disagreements grew up between Orthodox church members and their pastor. He was willing to exchange with ministers of more Arminian sentiments to satisfy like-thinking parishoners, but this led to his repudiation and the withdrawal of several church members in 1830 to form the Orthodox Congregational Society. A large number of the townsmen, 84, sympathized and sided with the insurgents in Shays' Rebellion; among them, 30 marched to Concord to disrupt the court there. In 1817 the north and south militias merged, and a Light Infantry was formed.

C. Settlement Pattern

The colonial milling centers at Townsend Harbor and West Townsend continue to grow, but are surpassed by a new (1787) central milling focus between them on the Squannacook corridor. Development of all three villages is stimulated by the opening of two turnpikes through town between 1801 and 1811, but the greatest growth occurs at the Center Village, where the two turnpikes meet. The hilltop meetinghouse (1771) is relocated here, to the west and downhill, in 1804, and the Orthodox Church is built here in 1830. At all three villages, commercial and residential development occurs along the Main Street corridor. At Townsend Center, residential growth also extends northwest along the Third New Hampshire Turnpike. Outside the villages, dispersed agricultural settlement continues, most intensively on Townsend Hill in the northeast.

D. Economic Base

A comparatively high proportion of the town's land was unimproved or woodlot in 1784, 72%, with a large additional amount classified as unimproved, 17.2%. While a moderate amount was under tillage, 2.8%, small proportions were used for meadow and mowing land, 4.3%, and pasturage, 3.6%.

E. Architecture

Residential: Building activity appears to increase significantly, probably linked to population growth. Center and double chimney, two-story houses survive, but end chimney and rear wall chimney houses, many built of brick, are highly visible. Brick end wall, end chimney houses are also fairly numerous. Relatively few numbers of single-story houses appear.

Institutional: The 1771 meetinghouse, which was never fully completed, is moved to the Center and remodelled, including the addition of three porches in 1804. When completed, the essentially new structure measured 45 x 60 feet.

In 1784, nine school districts had been established and each had a schoolhouse measuring 14 x 20 feet. Between 1802-10, many repairs were made to existing buildings and some were replaced.

Commercial: A two-story brick store was built in the Center in 1809.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes

The Peterboro and Shirley Branch of the Fitchburg Railroad is opened through the Squannacook River corridor in 1847, with depots in Townsend Harbor, Townsend Center, and West Townsend.

B. Population

During the first 25 years of this period, the town's population grew from 1,506 in 1830 to 2,092 in 1855. Thereafter the town entered a period of equal duration characterized by stability, when the total remained close to 2,000. Some manufacturing came to the town during the period, employing, however, only one-third as many men as agriculture did in 1840. Some immigrants came to the town, but the numbers are far below the county average, accounting for 5.5% in 1865; most were Irish, with small numbers of Canadians and English.

In 1839 a Restorationist Universalist society was formed at West Townsend, and the Unitarians, without a minister, may have lost members to them. In 1852 the latter group sold their meetinghouse to the Methodists, who had formed a class as a branch of the Lunenburg church in 1849. Two years later the Unitarians relocated in Townsend Harbor, but were not long successful. In West Townsend the Baptists established a Female Seminary in 1839, and the Congregationalists responded with an Academy in the Center in 1840; both disappeared, the former in 1854, the latter in 1846, and their buildings were bought by the town for schools. An agricultural library came to the town through the efforts of a book sale agent who persuaded 100 citizens to contribute \$300. In 1861 a levee was held to raise money to update and expand it. The district system was abolished in 1869. A Coronet Band was formed in 1838; Odd Fellows in 1866.

C. Settlement Pattern

Residential, commercial, and industrial growth continued at the three villages, as barrel making becomes the dominant local industry, and rail connections (1847) are established along the Squannacook corridor. Civic functions become more dispersed, with the location of the Baptist church (1835) and brick Universalist church (1848) in West Townsend, and the relocation of the new Unitarian church (1853) to Townsend Harbor.

Modest growth occurs at Townsend Harbor, with continued residential development along Main Street, mostly west of Harbor Road, and south on Harbor Road itself. The railroad depot and a cooper shop are located south of the Unitarian church.

More significant growth occurs at West Townsend, where the location of a female seminary (1836-63) in addition to the two churches, make it a strong, second civic center. A mixture of small-scale industries also concentrate here along the Squannacook River. Continued linear residential infill and extension occurs on Main Street, with a number of high-style and some innovative (duodecagon) houses. A cluster develops east of the depot, and development extends west from the depot to beyond Linden Street, with the greatest concentration just east of the Elm/Canal Street commercial focus. Residential development also extends north on Canal and south on Elm. Industrial development extends east and west along the Squannacook River, including saw and tub mills, wagon manufacturing, and leatherboard manufacturing.

Although some civic functions locate elsewhere, the Center Village remains the dominant settlement focus. An academy is established in 1841. Commercial and industrial activities become primarily oriented toward the depot south of the common between Elm and Main Street (Depot Street). Residential development continues east and west on Main Street and expands north on Howard, northeast on School and Central, and east on Highland Street north of the cemetery. New manufacturing locates to the south on South Elm on the Squannacook and also to the north on Central Street east of Wilson Brook. The major industrial development, however, is the location of the Fessendon Cooperage (1867) southeast of the depot, with the beginnings of a factory complex along the railroad corridor.

D. Economic Base

E. Architecture

Residential: Period survivals appear to concentrate in the Greek Revival and Italianate styles with the predominant form being the gable-end, side-passage plan. Center and double chimney, single-story dwellings were also observed. A brick, two-story, four-bay, gable-end Greek house is recorded. One two-story Greek Revival detailed rear wall chimney house was noted. The gable end form remained popular throughout the period with limited numbers of Second Empire and even a Gothic Revival example surviving. Two

hexadecagon houses (16-sided) remain; both are two-story, one being brick, the other frame, and both dating from 1850 to 1860.

Institutional: A brick, gable end Congregational meetinghouse was built on the common in 1830. Alterations were made in the 1880s and the present columns date from 1931. The 1804 meetinghouse (Unitarian) was sold to the Methodists in 1852, who turned the west end of the building to the south. The Unitarian society moved to Townsend Harbor and erected the three-bay, gable-end church that remains today. The Baptist meetinghouse in West Townsend was built in 1834. The gable-end, three-bay structure (originally 45 x 65 feet) was designed to resemble the Baptist meetinghouse in Fitchburg and has pointed-arched windows and a square tower. A brick Universalist meetinghouse was built in West Townsend in 1848.

The Townsend West Village Female Seminary was probably held in the gable-end, Greek Revival building with reversed front entry, built in 1839. An academy was erected in the Center in 1841. Both buildings were later bought by the town for use as public schools, and the Center building burned in 1870.

Industrial: The Spaulding Cooperage dates from the 1840s. A late period mill survives in Townsend Harbor.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes

The 19th-century rail and road network continues in use.

B. Population

Townsend's population continued to fluctuate within overall decline during this period, from 1,962 in 1870 to 1,812 in 1915, maintaining a figure averaging just under 1,800 after 1885. Manufacturing employment grew early in the period to over 300 males in 1875, but dropped to under 300 by 1905; agricultural employment fell off dramatically, to one-third its 1840 figure by 1875, but held with only a slight decline to the period's end. The foreign-born proportion of the population grew from 7.9% in 1875 to 12.7% in 1915; the Irish gave way to Canadians, particularly from Nova Scotia, with smaller numbers from England, and later Sweden and Finland. No changes took place with the town's denominations, and no other organizations are recorded. The town took over the library as free and public in 1873.

C. Settlement Pattern

Industrial growth continued at Townsend Center and Townsend Harbor. Very little residential expansion occurred, however. At Townsend Center, the Fessenden Cooperage facilities continued major growth along the railroad corridor in the 1880s and 1890s. Civic additions were also made to the Center with St. John's Catholic Church (1883-85) on School Street, and the Memorial Hall (1894) on Main Street. Some peripheral residential additions were

made. At Townsend Harbor, Spaulding Leatherboard builds a factory in the 1870s, which is rebuilt and enlarged after a fire in 1894. In the northwest, the Rusk Quarries were opened ca. 1900 on the southwest slope of Baker Hill.

D. Economic Base

E. Architecture

Residential: Little significant development apparent. Some gable-end, Queen Anne houses, especially in West Townsend and Townsend Harbor.

Institutional: A two-story, four-bay, mansard-roofed school was built in 1871 to replace the old academy building. The Spaulding School is a two-story brick Colonial Revival structure. The new town hall, a shingled, gable-end, Queen Anne period building, was constructed in 1894. The Queen Anne gable-end fire station in Townsend Harbor was built in 1875. The two-story, two-bay fire station in West Townsend also survives.

Industrial: The Spaulding Mills a two-story frame building with a pyramidal tower, was built in 1894.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes

The Main Street corridor through Townsend Harbor, Townsend Center and West Townsend is improved for auto use by the mid 1920s as Route 119 (Main Street-River Road). By ca. 1930 a new north/south Route 13 from Lunenburg through Townsend Center to New Hampshire is established (Fitchburg Road-Elm Street-Brookline Road). By the late 1930s, a northwest route from West Townsend is improved as Route 123 (Turnpike Road-Mason Road).

B. Population

The population expands again during this period, from 1,812 in 1915 to 2,065 in 1940, with a brief dip in 1930. The foreign-born remained constant at 13%, and 27.4% of the population was classified as rural in 1940.

C. Settlement Pattern

Little change occurs, as the Townsend Center Fessendon Barrel factory complex (expanded to occupy a quarter-mile of the land along Main Street by 1929), and the Spaulding Leatherboard mill at Townsend Harbor remain the town's dominant industrial foci. At Townsend Center, the Hart Memorial Library (1929) and Spaulding Memorial School (1932) are added. The Rusk Quarry on Baker Hill ceases operations by 1936.

D. Economic Base

E. Architecture

Residential: Development continues to be minimal, limited numbers of Colonial Revival, Four Square plans, and Bungalows.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

Center and villages are fairly well surveyed, but outlying areas deserve better coverage.

XII. SOURCES