

# MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

## WATERTOWN

Report Date: 1980

Associated Regional Report: Boston Area

**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: September 1980

Community: Watertown

### I. TOPOGRAPHY

Town occupies approximately 4.1 square miles near the western end of the Boston Basin. Most of the town is situated on the north side of the Charles River, though a small area on the south side was set off early from the surrounding town of Newton. Meeting House Hill (originally Strawberry Hill) and White's Hill are the town's principal peaks, drumlins set in the otherwise relatively level flood plain of the Charles River.

### II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Original town grant of Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630, with much territory ceded to peripheral towns including Waltham to the west (1720), Cambridge to the east (1754), and Belmont to the north (1859). Charles River remained as 17th century division line with Newton except for the 1636 fishweir grantline of 1636 (Galen Street area) on the south side.

### III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Early suburban industrial town on primary western corridor of Boston expansion. Located on Charles River plain with important regional ford/fishweir at Watertown Square and documented native sites along north bank of Charles. Very early English occupation with diffused settlement pattern along Mt. Auburn-Main Streets axis during mid-17th century, including preserved period burying ground and notable late First Period house. Economic focus developed at Watertown Square due to mills and bridge during Colonial period while civic center remained on Meeting House Hill at Belmont-Common Streets. During Federal period, Charles River-Mt. Auburn Street corridor chosen as sites of suburban estates and U.S. arsenal--a complex of original brick buildings extending through the Civil and First World Wars of quality design. Access by railroad and streetcar during mid-19th century created expansive commercial industrial center around Watertown Square with suburban period styles, including notable Italianate, Stick and Queen Anne examples, as well as worker's houses, around periphery of town center. Industrial fringe activity developed around East Watertown railroad corridor with a picturesque rural cemetery at Mt. Auburn of national significance. Important mid-19th century industrial sites along Charles River; Pleasant Street at Watertown Square (Hollingsworth & Whitney paper mills) and at Bemis (Aetna Mills)--both of Late Victorian design with neighboring workers' housing. Pressure of increasing metropolitan suburbanization during early 20th century prompted development of nearly all remaining open land. Expansion of affluent residential district up Common Street to Meeting House Hill including range of extensive two-family subdivisions along Mt. Auburn, Main and Belmont Street trolley routes by mid-20th century. Charles River remained an institutional/industrial corridor during Early Modern period. Notable examples include: Perkins Institute at Riverside with landmark Gothic Revival tower; Stanley Steamer/Bachrach Photography factory at Nonantum (early concrete design); and Quincy Market Storage at Bemis (late

Art Deco style). Watertown Square retains urban scale with original Victorian and Neo-Classic blocks, while retail sections of Mt. Auburn and Main Streets retain Early Modern gas stations and diners. Present pressure of development most evident along Charles River-railroad axis with large scale shopping complexes that threaten historic industrial fabric.

#### IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500 - 1620)

##### A. Transportation Routes:

Ford across Charles River near Galen Street bridge was an important focus of regional trails. Documented East/West trail to ford site followed Mt. Auburn-Main Streets from Cambridge fishing grounds along northside of river to western interior as "Connecticut Path". A secondary route from Fresh Pond followed East/West over Meeting House Hill as Belmont Street, with conjectured link to ford along Orchard-Common Streets. Possible routes along river from ford appear as fragments of Riverside, and Walnut-Coolidge Streets to east and Waltham Street to west. Routes on south side from ford were Galen and Fifth-Jackson Streets to Newton.

##### B. Settlement Pattern:

While no period sites have been archaeologically documented, some are known from documentary sources; especially on north side of Charles on bluffs around Perkins Institute. Other unspecific sites all along Charles and near Sawins pond.

##### C. Subsistence Pattern:

An important area for access to seasonal fish runs in Charles. Known weir just south of Watertown Square.

##### D. Observations:

Area probably had a large seasonal population, depending on when fish spawned. Access to coast also made this a likely area for native-European trading activities prior to colonial settlement.

#### V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620 - 1675)

##### A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails incorporated as highways with primary East/West route to Connecticut along Mt. Auburn-Main Streets. Bridge across Charles at Galen Street ford by 1642. Town grant division highways of 1630s survive as series of North/South links between Mt. Auburn and Belmont Streets including Grove, School, Common and Lexington Streets. Warren Street was interior highway of 1638 Town Plot.

##### B. Population

The old town of Watertown (including Waltham and Weston) was settled by 100 families. By the 1650s this figure had grown to 160 families.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Watertown is important as early example of the East Anglian dispersed settlement system. There was no precise town center, a result of the division between economic focus at Charles River ford site (Watertown Square) and civic center along Mt. Auburn Street. Initial settlement was at Oldham farm in 1630 (Perkins Institute--"Dorchester Fields") along Charles River, shifted to Gerry's Landing at Mt. Auburn/Elmwood/Fresh Pond Parkway (now Cambridge) by 1631 with first meeting house. Settlement of western lands prompted relocation of meeting house to Mt. Auburn and Arlington Streets in 1635 with burying ground of 1642 surviving. At same time, ford site at Watertown Square became important in 1630s due to bridge, fish weir and corn mill resulting in Town Plot division of 1638 (Main-Lexington-Belmont-Warren Streets). Became the primary center of house lots within town.

D. Economic Base:

Largely agriculture and grazing, supplemented by fishing, including bass, shad, alewives, and smelt. A town weir was located near the present Galen Street Bridge. The earliest mill was Mayhew's, built in 1634. The mill was located adjacent to the Mill Bridge (Galen Street) and fed by a short power canal (later "Mill Creek") from a stone dam a few hundred yards upstream.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1676 - 1776)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highway system remained from 17th century with primary axis along Mt. Auburn-Main Streets and improvement of Charles River bridge in early 18th century (intact to 1906).

B. Population:

No figures exist for the early Colonial period, though by 1765, 117 families had settled in Watertown proper (693 persons). The number of houses in the town was listed as 103.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Town remained divided between an economic center at Watertown Square and civic center on Mt. Auburn-Belmont Streets. Meetinghouse is relocated west to Belmont and Common Streets (Meeting House Hill) in 1695, and again to Mt. Auburn and Common Streets about 1760 with surviving Common Street burying ground.

D. Economic Base:

Predominantly agriculture and grazing, though by 1700 the number of cattle had declined to about half the 1650 figure. The community turned increasingly to sheep raising. A number of farmers sent vegetables to Boston by cart or river barge, and timber was sent to shipyards at Medford and elsewhere.

E. Architecture:

Residential: For a town of considerable prominence in the 17th and 18th centuries, Watertown has very few extant early structures. The Abraham Browne

House (c. 1698) is the only surviving First period house, while the hip roofed center chimney Fowle House, dating from the mid-18th century, is one of the few surviving period examples. Commercial, Institutional, Industrial: no known structures extant.

## VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1776 - 1830)

### A. Transportation Routes:

Improvement of East/West axis from Boston across Charles with construction of local turnpikes in early 19th century (Arsenal and North Streets) focusing at Watertown Square. Other period roads from town center include Spring and Pleasant Streets.

### B. Population:

Moderate population growth from 1,057 in 1776 to 1,641 in 1830. Principal rise occurs between 1790 and 1810, possibly attributable to new industrial activity around Mill Creek.

### C. Settlement Patterns:

Division between civic and economic activities was partly resolved as primary town center emerged at Watertown Sq. during early 19th century. Charles River developed as an industrial fringe belt with mill sites at Watertown Square and Bemis (Bridge Street) and U.S. Arsenal on Boston Turnpike (1816). In contrast, hill vistas attracted affluent Boston suburban estates with Oakley (now country club site) and Gore Place (intact) as important area examples. Local residential area emerged on Main Street west of square.

### D. Economic Base:

Grist mill established by 1778 at Bridge Street, afterwards expanding under Seth Bemis with mills on both sides of the river. Bemis introduced early cotton spinning by machinery (1803); first U.S. manufacture of cotton duck for sails during Embargo (1807); first recorded use of coal gas in America in his mill (1812-13); and unusual "rolling dam" (1822).

At Galen and Pleasant Streets, continuous expansion; by 1800, several mills straddled power canal ("Mill Creek") adjacent to bridge manufacturing paper, dyes, medicines, soap and candles. James Robbins' soap and candle factory appears to have laid the foundation for the later prosperity of the mid and late 19th century soap and starch works. By 1829 A. Lewando had established a dye house at Galen and Pleasant Streets.

The period saw the arrival of textile workers from the English Midlands. Benjamin Fewkes established short lived New England Lace Factory (1820-23), and to compete with Nottingham lace, introduced first lace making machines in U.S.

Watertown, as the head of navigation on the Charles, was readily accessible to barges and schooners, one reason for the early industrial activity in this place. The Watertown Arsenal was relocated here from Charlestown for this reason.

E. Architecture:

Residential: A few twin rear wall chimney houses of the period survive , particularly in the neighborhood just south of Route 20. Surviving Federal period houses are rare. Though it burned in 1927, Oakley, Harrison Gray Otis' country house designed by Charles Bulfinch, once stood in Watertown.

Industrial: Alexander Parris designed the original Federal brick structures comprising the Watertown Arsenal, established in 1816. Commercial, Institutional: no known structures extant.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830 - 1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Continued improvement of Boston connections with branch railroad from Cambridge along Charles River plain to Arsenal and Watertown Square in 1847 (in part abandoned), and early horse railway route from Cambridge to Watertown on Mt. Auburn Street in 1857.

B. Population:

Population rose from 1,641 to 4,326 in 1870, doubling in the 25 years between 1830 and 1855. Of the population in 1865, Irish immigrants represented nearly a quarter.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Watertown Square continued to develop as major commercial center with suburban residential district on Mt. Auburn-Common Streets (though cut off from center by railroad). East Watertown became site for Boston area fringe activities including Mt. Auburn and Catholic cemeteries, and industrial development along railroad near Arsenal. Workers' neighborhoods emerged around Watertown Sq., Riverside, as well as East Watertown and Bemis.

D. Economic Base:

By 1832, Bemis's satinet and cotton duck factory, the largest factory in town, producing \$112,500 worth of goods annually. By 1837, the cotton mill on the north side furnished the warp for satinet made in the mill on the south (Newton) side. Purchased by the Aetna Mills 30 years later, the complex switched to producing fine woolens and worsteds, enjoying a long period of prosperity. Another prosperous mill in the 1830s was the May paper mill, a few years later bought out by one of May's employees, Leonard Whitney. The invention here in 1857 of a bag making machine revolutionized the packaging industry and brought new prosperity to the firm. With a new partner, E.A. Hollingsworth, the firm expanded dramatically, and much of the present complex on Pleasant Street dates to this 1867 period.

Ready-made shirts, first introduced in New York in 1832, were being produced in Watertown very shortly afterward, largely as a home industry. In 1848, C.F. Hathaway entered the business and it was probably not long after that sewing

machines and factory production were introduced. The "Hathaway shirt" became widely known throughout New England. Associated with his shirt factory Hathaway built what later became the Metropolitan Laundry, a necessity in the manufacture of white shirts and operated as part of the shirt factory. Simultaneously, about 1845, is the first evidence of a starch factory, an industry which later grew to considerable proportions.

Thomas Dalby, an English weaver from Leicester, arrived in Watertown during this period, and as business prospered built the present frame factory on Morse Street.

The U.S. Arsenal during this period gained a reputation for the development of cast iron guns, and under Thomas J. Rodman, a pioneer in metallurgy, developed the Rodman Casting Process and the Rodman seacoast gun. When the first news of the Civil War was known, Rodman, as commanding officer, contracted out cannon balls and shells to Miles Pratt, then a stove founder with foundry and wharves on Galen Street at the river. The Pratt Co. was also credited with the first effective coal and combination coal/wood stoves.

#### E. Architecture:

Residential: A number of simple Greek Revival and Italianate houses were constructed around Watertown Square and south of Route 20.

Institutional: Several buildings, including Commandant's Quarters, constructed at Arsenal during Civil War.

Commercial: A 3-story brick commercial block and a commercial hotel were constructed at Watertown Square: no known extant structures.

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

#### A. Transportation Routes:

Rail system and roads remained from mid-19th century with further extension of streetcar routes from Cambridge along Belmont Street to Waltham along Main Street and to Newton along Galen Street with Trolley routes focused upon Watertown Square. Original streetcar yard survived at Water Street.

#### B. Population:

Population rose from 4,326 in 1870 to 16,515 at the end of the period. The population doubled in the 30 years between 1870 and 1900; it nearly doubled again in the next fifteen as street railways and the completion of the subway to Cambridge made suburban life attractive. The Irish still predominated among the foreign born population, though by 1905 substantial numbers had also arrived from Italy. East Watertown's Armenian population developed along with the Hood Rubber Company beginning in the late 1890's. After the Adana Massacre in 1909 immigrants from all parts of Armenia began to settle in Watertown.

#### C. Settlement Pattern:

Extension of trolley service from Boston prompted further development of residential districts along Mt. Auburn-Main Streets; similar effect on Galen Street

(Newton). Affluent suburban area extended up Walnut and Common Street hills with worker's district around Galen/Bemis Street, and East Watertown. Industrial activity continued to expand along railroad river axis.

#### D. Economic Base:

This period witnessed the major expansion and prosperity of most of Watertown's 19th century industries. The Hollingsworth and Whitney paper mills won major awards for quality papers; Lewando's French Dyeing and Cleansing Establishment, under new ownership in the 1870s, experienced unprecedented expansion as new equipment--produced by Watertown's own Empire Laundry Machinery Co.--dramatically increased the quantity of laundry and cleaning the company could handle. The Metropolitan Laundry experienced a similar prosperity with equipment from the same firm. Starch and soap works expanded--among them Warren Soap Mfg. ("Warren Standard Soaps"), whose products were known nationwide, and the Barker and Crystal Springs starch factories.

By the 1870s, Watertown had become the center of a thriving cattle trade. The Union Market Stockyards were reported "the largest in the country in the volume of animals exported from the port of Boston" (Hodges, p.116). After feeding, the cattle were shipped across the river to the Brighton slaughterhouse or else shipped on the hoof to England.

Sterling Elliott erected a bicycle factory in 1882 on the south side, four years later inventing the quadricycle, directly responsible for automobile steering mechanisms. In 1894, Elliott built the first bicycle with inflatable tires. Three years later he sold out to the Stanley Brothers who began manufacturing photographic dry plates. In this factory in 1897 they produced the first steam car, later building a reinforced concrete factory for the purpose, believed to be the first such concrete structure in New England. In the years preceeding World War I, the business prospered, though the business was sold in 1918.

During most of this period, the Aetna woollen mills were the largest manufacturer in the town (in 1865 producing \$938,000 worth of goods) and most of the extensive brick mills now on the site date from this period of prosperity. This supremacy was challenged at the very end of the period by the Hood Rubber Company, founded in 1896 in Watertown. By 1920, the company employed 10,000 persons.

During the post Civil War period, the U.S. Arsenal achieved considerable fame for resolving the question of steel use in cannon making. The Emery Testing Machine, designed by A.H. Emery in 1875, was installed in Building 71 in 1881, and between then and 1917 made over three thousand tests on materials per year.

#### E. Architecture:

Residential: Many highstyle, architect-designed houses in the Second Empire, Queen Anne, and Colonial Revival styles were built, particularly in the neighborhoods just north and east of Watertown Square. Older neighborhoods north and south of the Square, and south of Route 20, filled in with simpler Italianate, mansard, Queen Anne, and Colonial Revival cottages and houses, including some double and two-family houses. Several isolated groupings include a well



preserved cluster of workers' houses just west of Mt. Auburn Cemetery as well as one outstanding Italianate house on Grove Street and two well developed Stick Style houses, one on Galen Street and the other on Belmont Street.

Institutional: Colonial Revival Public Library (Shaw and Hunnewell, 1882) and Town Hall built along with nearly all extant churches at the town center. Several schools constructed in the Colonial Revival style and the Perkins School moved to their Collegiate Gothic Campus (1912). Jacobethan High School (Charles Brigham, 1914; now East Jr. High) also built.

Commercial: Many of the major commercial structures at Watertown Square were constructed in this period, from the earliest extant, the Romanesque Revival Otis Building (A.W. Haynes, 1889) to an outstanding grouping of Beaux Arts bank buildings, all rising to 3 stories.

Industry: Aetna Mills, Lewando's Cleaners, and Hood Rubber Company buildings were built in this period, all of brick. The Aetna Mills company still stands. Hollingsworth and Whitney and Stanley Motor Carriage Company complexes also are extant.

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

##### A. Transportation Routes:

19th century rail and trolley routes remained through mid 20th century. Improvement of local roads into autohighways, including East/West U.S. Route 20 (Main-North Streets) and local Route 16 (Watertown-Mt. Auburn Streets). Original early traffic blinker at Walnut Street Metropolitan District Commission parkways constructed along Charles River in 1930s include Charles River Road and Nonantum Road with original period lightposts.

##### B. Population:

The growth encouraged by suburban growth and new industry continued until 1930 when it dropped to negligible proportions with the advent of the depression. Numerous Italian and Armenian-born families settled in Watertown during the first decade of this period. The population reached 34,913 in 1930. It was not far above that figure in 1975.

##### C. Settlement Pattern:

Nearly entire area developed for either residential or industrial activity. Suburban subdivisions completely encompassed Meeting House and Whitney Hills with affluent axis along Common Street and two family houses on periphery along trolley routes to Waltham and Cambridge. Watertown Square continued to expand as important commercial center along Main Street with secondary retail center in East Watertown (Grove Street). Industrial activity expanded along railroad-river corridor with major complexes at Arsenal and Bemis and related workers' neighborhoods. Intermediate areas between Watertown Square and East Watertown developed into civic sites for schools and country clubs, from former estates.

#### D. Economic Base:

Although in 1924 there were only 26 manufacturing plants, the town was fifth in the county in value of production. Hood was the largest plant engaged in the manufacture of rubber and canvas footwear. In 1929, the concern was purchased by the B.F. Goodrich Company and for 30 years continued to be Watertown's dominant employer. Faced with increasing competition from imports, however, the plant finally closed; none of the Hood buildings survive today.

Several firms engaged in the manufacture of rubber, plastics, and adhesives; Underwood located its plant in Watertown in 1907 (though its period of innovation in the canning industry had been in the previous century and another place); Lewis-Shephard manufactured lifting machines and industrial trucks. Most of the 20th century industrial development was in the east part of the town near the Arsenal or to the west along Pleasant Street.

Lewando's after 1900 had expanded greatly, making deliveries all over the East coast from a number of separate establishments. By 1930 when the present headquarters building was built facing Watertown Square, the company was the largest in the country. Western Electric's monumental quarters in the east end date to the following year, bringing the electronics industry to Watertown.

#### E. Architecture:

Residential: Much of the northern section of Watertown was developed with simple Colonial Revival and Craftsman 2-family structures. Some good bungalows, Dutch Colonial and Colonial Revival single family houses were also built.

Institutional: Some schools, post office and police station were built.

Commercial: One and two story brick commercial blocks built at neighborhood corners.

Industrial: Many small scale industrial buildings built along North, Pleasant, and Arsenal Streets with one outstanding intact Art Deco example, the Quincy Market Cold Storage building; also Arsenal Laboratory.

#### XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

Watertown desperately needs surveying; nothing done. The town had lost much of its early architectural heritage by the turn of the 20th century; nevertheless, it retains several well defined mid to late 19th century residential neighborhoods and these must, now that so much of Watertown's once important 17th and 18th century fabric has been lost, be recognized as the town's true architectural strength. These neighborhoods are: 1. west of Galen Street (working and middle class housing, Greek Revival, Italianate and Second Empire; some Stick, some simple Queen Anne); 2. east of Mt. Auburn from Phillips to Walnut (high-style, expensive Queen Anne, Stick, Shingle and Second Empire); 3. north of Main Street to Hudson (working and middle class Italianate, Second Empire; some late Greek Revival); 4. west of Mt. Auburn Cemetery off Rifle Court (small scale Italianate and Queen Anne workers' cottages). The Arsenal complex is, of course, of major

significance, but there are many other surviving 19th century industrial complexes, whose potential has, so far, gone unrecognized. Another significant grouping is the cluster of bank buildings at Watertown Square. Notable individual structures include the Quincy Market Cold Storage Plant (good late Deco) and an eccentric Italianate house on Grove Street.

No survey has as yet been conducted of the town. Among the industrial buildings observed in the reconnaissance: Hollingsworth and Whitney Paper Co.'s Pequossette Mill; Lewando's Dyeing and Cleansing Co.; Thomas Dalby Knitting Mill; the Aetna Mills; Stanley Steam Vehicle Co.; Quincy Market Cold Storage Warehouse; and the Crystal Springs Starch Works. Both Aetna and Stanley Steamer are National Register quality; probably also Lewando's and the Pequossette Mill. The Watertown Arsenal, both from an architectural and an engineering point of view, deserves to be a National Historic Landmark.

## XII. SOURCES

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