

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

WEST BOYLSTON

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: West Boylston

DRAFT

I. TOPOGRAPHY

The topography of West Boylston is dominated by the valley of the South Branch of the Nashua River, formed by the junction of the Stillwater and Quinapoxet Rivers in the northern end of town. Shaped during the last glaciation, this valley was the bed of glacial Lake Nashua, and is now again flooded by the waters of the Wachusett Reservoir. 870 acres of fertile bottomland and a valuable large water power sites, which during the 19th century contained the principal manufacturing districts of the town, were submerged in 1905 to provide drinking water for the growing Boston area.

Sandy loam and gravel terraces border the Reservoir, providing productive fields for market gardening, particularly the plain in the northeast corner of town. The surface of the land rises steadily to the south and west, climbing to nearly 900 feet on the western boundary with Holden.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Second Parish of Boylston formed in 1796. Incorporated as a town, from parts of Boylston, Holden and Sterling, 1808. Parts of Boylston annexed, 1820.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

A suburban, central uplands community, on the Nashua River Corridor, with permanent European settlement after 1720 as part of Boylston. Meetinghouse site established 1795. Thriving early 19th century industrial center. Available water power of Nashua River and tributaries stimulates growth of valley factory villages of Harrisville and Oakdale, while Central Village also becomes the main commercial focus. Industrial expansion, with specializations in textiles and shoe manufacturing, further stimulated by north-south railroad connection in 1848. Peak of growth 1870s. Major socio-economic upset and landscape alteration with construction of Wachusett Reservoir and Watershed (completed 1905). Post-war development as northern suburb of Worcester, with industrial growth along rail corridor in southeast, and commercial strip development along Route 12. Many good examples of vernacular and high style Federal Period upland farm dwellings survive, and suburbanization currently poses a significant threat to remaining functional 19th century farmsteads on Prospect Street, south of the center.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Primarily north-south routes: Maple and Prospect joining a path following the bed of the Nashua River from east to north, current flooded by Wachusett Reservoir.

B. Settlement Pattern:

Probable settlement continues in area of known Woodland site near Nashua River, between Pierce, Hartwell and Shrewsbury Street. Others likely on terrace to the north of the river, and its confluence with the Stillwater and Quinapoxet rivers.

C. Subsistence Base:

Seasonal fishing on rivers, probable agriculture on terrace overlooking rivers' confluence, as well as seasonal hunting.

D. Observations:

Little information available but Nipmucks group, Nashaways, located permanent camp in the area to the north, and probably exploited this area seasonally for fishing, hunting and gathering, and agriculture.

V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Same as during Contact period.

B. Population:

Native population reduced with formation of praying towns. Continued raids on Lancaster inhibit colonial settlement to the south and west.

A portion allotted as individual grants: Davenport (1650) and Malden (1665).

C. Settlement Pattern:

Continued seasonal use by Native population; but no evidence of colonial occupation.

D. Economic Base:

Same as during Contact Period.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1676-1776)

A. Transportation Routes

Location of period structures indicates continued use of native trails, with additional routes including Lancaster St., Fairbanks St., Laurel St., Hosmer St., Shrewsbury St., and Temple St.

B. Population

Originally a portion of Boylston, Sterling and Holden, formed as a precinct (1796) with 88 voters, 33 churchmembers. No figures for earlier periods.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Probably more in the southeast section where garrison located; primarily dispersed farmsteads oriented to their parent towns to the east, north and southwest.

D. Economic Base:

Grains, rye, corn and oats, and cider produced and traded to Boston. Grist and clothiers mills at what would become the town center.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Predominant house form is center chimney two-story house of three or five bays. Little evidence of other dwelling types although double chimney plans later in the period are possible.

Commercial: 1764 structure of Ezra Beamer (then part of Boylston) is only recorded tavern.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

The Colonial period routes remain in use, with roads radiating out of and along the central valley. Prospect St. is the main north-south route, with Maple Street and alternating route to Worcester, Goodale St. to Holden, and a valley highway (name unknown) from Boylston to Sterling through the center.

B. Population:

Part of Boylston to 1808. Population increases for 1810 (636) to 1830 (1055). Second Parish formed (1795) after meetinghouse site controversy. Baptists organize 1813.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Meetinghouse center established on old common 1795. Settlement focus quickly shifts to valley, with manufacturing use of power sites on Quinapoxet, Stillwater, and Nashua Rivers. Baptist meetinghouse built 1818. Cotton mills in central village by 1808, in Oakdale by 1814.

D. Economic Base:

When separated from Boylston and incorporated as town in 1808, West Boylston contained a cotton yarn mill, begun in 1806, 2 grist mills, 2 sawmills, a clothiers mill, a tannery, one cabinetmaker's shop, 2 book binderies, four blacksmiths, and sixty farmers. However, the large water power potential of the Stillwater was soon realized and harnessed; by 1832, four textile mills, employing 226 persons, and a textile machine manufacturer employing 23 were in operation, producing goods worth more than \$150,000.

In 1814 the second cotton mill, chartered to the West Boylston Manufacturing Company, was erected in the village of Oakdale, then called White's Village. This mill, together with the earlier mill operated by John Slater and Company, located at Lower Factory Village, employed 54 persons and produced yarn, sheeting, plaids and candlewicking worth \$30,000 in 1820. Other manufacturers recorded that year included a scythe and edge tool factory, 3 saddle and harness makers, 2 clothiers with carding machines, and a cooper, a basket, a cabinet maker and a wagon maker.

Boot and shoe manufacturing was begun during the 1820s on a small scale; only 4 men worked at it in 1832. A small tannery was also in operation. Palm leaf hats and straw braid manufacture employed the equivalent of 60 women per week in the home production of 13,000 hats and 50,000 yards of braid in 1832.

Agriculture was practiced by at least half of the population, raising stock, hay, grains, and fruit.

E. Architecture:

Residential: One and two story center chimney plan houses continue into the Federal period but are outnumbered by double and few rear wall chimneys, including two brick double plans (one double-pile, center passage) and an 1805 brick rear wall chimney house.

Institutional: First meetinghouse is built in 1793. Town formed from Boylston in 1808, and four school districts are created and school houses erected. Baptists organize in 1813; erect chapel at Oakdale in 1818. Liberal Society is formed, 1822.

Commercial: No record of significant commercial development aside from necessary stores.

Industrial: By founding of the town in 1808, there were established two grist and saw mills, a clothier mill, a tannery, four blacksmith shops, a cabinet maker, and two book binders.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

The early 19th century road network continues to be used. Worcester and Nashua Railroad passes between old common and central village, and on through Harrisville/Oakdale (1848).

B. Population:

Population almost triples over the period from 1830 (1055) to 1870 (2862), with greatest growth in 1840s (+562). Foreign-born 19% of population in 1865. Congregational church splits in 1832, after first meetinghouse burns, two new churches are built. Second Baptist church built 1832. Methodist society in Oakdale 1858. Catholics organize in 1859.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Continued industry-related growth in valley villages around textile manufactures, with more dispersed growth related to boot and shoe production and basket manufacturing. Central village becomes the main commercial/industrial focus, with secondary centers continuing to develop at Oakdale/Harrisville and around the railroad depot west of the Center. A linear residential area develops along Main Street.

Universalists built new meetinghouse on old common (1832) while Baptists, Calvinists (both 1832) and Catholics (1859) locate in central village. Methodists build in Oakdale (1858). Stores in central village on Main Street west of Sterling Road intersection.

D. Economic Base:

West Boylston's investment in manufacturing enterprises continued to increase through this period. By 1837, seven cotton mills, employing 257 persons, were located along the Nashua River and its two tributaries. An intricate system of dams, canals, ponds, and races paralleled the Nashua River, supplying power to the several cotton, saw, and gristmills. Between 1830 and 1855, population more than doubled, largely the result of the continued growth in the textile industry.

After cotton, the bottoming of boots was the leading industry. By 1842, 2,000-3,000 boots were bottomed daily for Worcester manufacturers. A factory was erected in 1850 near the upper railroad depot, followed in 1856 by a second shop. Production peaked around 1865, when 186 people were employed in producing boots worth \$375,000. At least two boot and shoe factories and five shops were in operation in 1870; and additional twelve men referred to themselves as bootmakers.

Basketmaking was a small but profitable business during this period. At least two shops produced baskets of various sizes, but mostly large baskets of the textile mills. Another establishment operating as an adjunct to the textile industry was the shop of David Murdock, who produced warper stop motion machines from 1830 to the end of the century, holding a virtual monopoly in its production. Other small-scale manufacturers produced sash, doors, and blinds (one establishment), tinware (one establishment), saddles, harnesses and trunks, and palm leaf hats.

Agriculture also prospered during these years, with the greatest increase occurring in the number of fruit trees cultivated and with a shift in dairying to milk production. Between 1855 and 1875, the quantity of milk marketed increased nearly twenty-fold to 137,000 gallons. Poultry, eggs, and market gardening of vegetables also began to take on greater importance as farmers had a good local market in West Boylston's manufacturing villages and in Worcester and Boston.

E. Architecture:

Residential: There are settlement clusters at the town center and following the railroad and Nashua River northwest to the Harris factory and Oakdale mills, and Northeast from the Center around the Beaman Manufacturing Company. Major portions of these areas are now flooded. Evidence of Greek sidehall, center and double chimney plans, some sidehall Italianate plans, Gothic house with bargeboards, and some modest two-story Second Empire dwellings. Typical Greek Revival and Italianate period workers' single-family housing survives in Oakdale, and one may assume the same existed at Harrisville to the south before it was flooded.

Institutional: First meetinghouse (1795) burned in 1832 and was replaced with a brick structure located in the Nashua River valley. Baptist church built in 1832 on west side of Center. The liberal Society formed the Unitarian church and erected a meetinghouse on the common in 1832; apparently they disbanded shortly because by 1841-1842, Methodists were meeting in the "unoccupied Unitarian church." Methodists construct a "Freedom Hall" in Oakdale in 1851, and finally erect the present church in Oakdale in 1859.

Commercial: Worcester and Nashua Railroad is built through the Center and northwest to the mill towns of Harrisville and Oakdale around mid-century. Valley Hotel (along Nashua?) destroyed by fire in 1853. Assume commercial development at Center, Harrisville, and Oakdale concomitant with developing mill industry.

Industrial: Beaman Manufacturing Co. at Center, Oakdale mills (West Boylston Manufacturing Co.) and Harrisville mills are centers of industrial development for period. No surviving buildings.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Massachusetts Central Division, Boston and Maine Railroad construction through Nashua Valley in 1890s. Wachusett Reservoir construction floods road and rail network in Valley. New bridges constructed across reservoir to maintain through routes. By early 1900s, street-car lines pass from Worcester north through the new Boylston Center to Sterling.

B. Population:

Population remains stable at 2,900 from 1870-1895, then cut in half by 1905 (1,571), with construction of Wachusett Reservoir. Further decline to 1915 (1,318). New Catholic church built in 1882, new Baptist church built in 1890.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Little expansion after the 1870s. New churches constructed in central village by Catholics (1884), and Baptist (1890). Major event, construction of Wachusett Reservoir (1905), which destroys the town's industrial base. Six mills, eight schoolhouses, four churches, 360 houses occupied by over 1,700 people destroyed. Central Village, Harrisville, and most of Oakdale disappear. Twenty-five houses moved, some to the old common area, which becomes the new institutional center, with town hall (1904) and Baptist church (1902).

D. Economic Base:

The last quarter of the 19th century saw continued expansion in West Boylston's industries and in civic improvement. By 1880, five bridges crossed the Stillwater, Quinapoxet, and Nashua rivers. The first, a three-arch stone bridge, was built in 1856 across the Nashua River at Valley Village. In 1875, an iron bridge of 100-foot span was erected at Central Village; it was followed in 1879 by a 50 foot span iron bridge over the Stillwater at Oakdale, and in 1880 another 50 foot iron span over the Quinapoxet at Harrisville.

Four of the five remaining mills expanded or built new mills. S. R. Warfield built a large satinnet yarn and warp mill and shoddy mill in Harrisville in 1882, doubling the capacity of his 1868 mill. In 1868, the West Boylston Mfg. Co. erected a second stone factory. Fire destroyed both the old and new mills in 1872, but a single large mill was rebuilt. By the late 19th century, the company owned 32 houses and tenements in Oakdale to house its employees. The Clarendon Mills at Lower Factory Village added a bleachery in 1881, and employed 190. A second enlargement occurred in 1891. The Harris Mill also built an addition to its mill in 1893.

In 1895, the Metropolitan Water Board announced its plan to construct the Wachusett Reservoir. Over the next five years, the Board purchased all the mills, building and property along the three rivers; by 1899, the surviving shoe factory and five remaining textile mills closed and were demolished. The West Boylston Mfg. Co. removed to Easthampton, Mass. in 1900, and in 1927 operations were moved from there to Montgomery, Alabama. Clarendon Mills moved its machinery to West Peterborough, New Hampshire and Jonathan Gould moved his shoddy operation to Shirley. West Boylston's population dropped from 2968 in 1895 to 1571 in 1905.

Agriculture did not experience a similar decline with the construction of the reservoir, undoubtedly because the market for its products lay largely beyond its boundaries, in Worcester and Boston. The quantity and value of goods actually increased, showing the largest jump between 1895 and 1905 than in any other decade of the last half of the century. Dairy products made up 42% of the value of goods sold in 1905, hay and fodder - 24%, vegetables - 10%, and poultry and eggs - 6%.

E. Architecture:

Residential: The reservoir split the town center into West Boylston and South Boylston. Town suffered a major decline in population with the loss of industry following the flooding of the reservoir. No significant growth; some four-square dwellings and bungalows.

Institutional: In 1891, Baptists build on site of 1832 church a stone Gothic Revival church with corner tower (abandoned but still standing on the edge of the reservoir). Fieldstone Mt. Vernon Chapel erected in cemetery east of common built in 1891. 100 foot Hall and brick Worcester County Truant School (Mass. Youth Institute) by 1898. In 1902, the Congregational church built a Queen Anne/Colonial Revival building on the site of the original meetinghouse after the MDC took over the 1832 brick structure in the valley (building was brick-faced in 1954). Two-story, Colonial Revival high school designed by Cooper & Bailey. Boston, in 1903, three-bay brick Colonial Revival Beaman Memorial Library in 1912.

Commercial: Little apparent expansion of commercial activity after 1900.

Industrial: Industrial development appears to end with the flooding of 19th century mill sites.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

By the 1920s, streetcar line are abandoned and local highways are developed as automobile roads. By early 1920s, Route 12 is in use as the main highway from Worcester to Fitchburg, with Route 110 (Lancaster Street) a connector to Clinton. By the mid 1930s,

Route 64 is improved as a connector through Oakdale to the northwest, and by 1940 it becomes part of Route 140, with connectors to the southeast.

B. Population:

Increase over the period, with suburban growth from Worcester, from 1915 (1,318) to 1935 (2,158). Drop from 1935-1940 (-336).

C. Settlement Pattern

Suburban development occurs primarily in the southern corner of town, near the Worcester border, primarily on the Route 12/Burncoat Street corridor, and also along Malden Street in the southwest. Worcester County Tuberculosis Hospital established along the southeast border with Boylston.

D. Economic Base

Manufacturing played a minor role in West Boylston's economy during the early 20th century. Few accurate statistics are available. A small church organ manufactory operated from the 1920s to the 1940s; a hay and grain dealer, E.F. Cowee, operated a prosperous business through this period. The economy was largely dominated by agricultural production, with dairying, vegetables, and poultry continuing in importance.

E. Architecture:

No significant development.