

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

WILMINGTON

Report Date: 1981

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.

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MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

Date: 1981

Community: Wilmington

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Town occupies 17.12 square miles of the watershed of the Ipswich River which runs eastward through the center of the town from its sources in highlands of Burlington. Much of the town is marshland of between 90 and 100 feet elevation above sea level, collecting the drainage from the higher areas of Woburn and Burlington to the south and southwest. Only at the northern end of the town are there any pronounced hills -- which there reach a maximum elevation of 255 feet. A small portion of the town on the west and northwest is drained by the Shawsheen River, which forms part of the town's extreme western boundary. The soil is light and sandy, making the town well-suited for the cultivation of hops in the 19th century.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Originally part of Woburn and Reading grants of mid-17th century with Billerica division along Shawshine River. Formed as independent town of Wilmington 1730 with 18th century boundaries of surrounding towns.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Suburban industrial town on Boston-Merrimac corridor. Located at headwaters of Ipswich River with extensive meadowlands and native site potential around Silver Lake and highground trail routes. Early settlement zone between Woburn, Billerica and Andover during mid-17th century with some late First Period houses, including notable example on Chestnut Street. Frontier of instability during Queen Anne's War in northern highland area, but agricultural prosperity along primary Middlesex and Woburn Streets corridor by early 18th century with meeting house common and some well preserved early Georgian houses. Location of Middlesex Canal along Main-Shawshine Street axis refocuses development to Wilmington Center by early 19th century with some vernacular Federal examples. Development is again reoriented by early railroad routes between Boston, Lowell and Salem during mid-19th century with surviving depots at Wilmington and North Wilmington, and related examples of modest period suburban architecture. Limited industrial potential during late 19th century with agriculture and transport services. Meeting house common retains status residential district with axis of local growth along Middlesex Street. Important corridor of Boston-

Lowell auto highway routes with tract development around Silver Lake by early 20th century and commercial services along Main-Shawshine Street axis. Presently the area is extensively developed for suburban residential potential which has nearly surrounded much of early historic fabric, while industrial site potential along railroad corridors continues to expand into remaining meadowland especially in southern portion of town.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Corridor of interregional routes between Mystic, Shawshine and Ipswich rivers. Primary N/S trail appears as Main-Middlesex-Salem-Woburn Streets with alternate branches from Mystic Valley as Chestnut and Woburn Streets. Connections to Shawshine-Merrimac are presumed as Salem, Glen and Shawshine Streets with focus around Silver Lake. Western links to Vine Brook appear to follow portions of Burlington, Aldrich and possibly Hopkins-Lake Streets, while cross trails east to Ipswich are presumed along Salem and Park Streets. Ballardville Road around Wilmington highlands might also be considered a possible trail candidate.

B. Settlement Pattern:

No period sites known. Several multi-components sites with possible period occupations along Lubber Brook/Silver Lake and Ipswich River. Additional site concentration in adjacent Andover (Fosters and Martins Ponds) may spill over into north-eastern part of town. Possible wintering sites around Silver Lake.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Rocky and boggy upland environment probably used primarily as a resource zone by coastal tribes. Hunting and trapping, ice fishing in ponds.

D. Observations:

Location in upland watershed made this area accessible from Merrimack/Shawsheen, Ipswich, and Mystic River basins. Probably an inter-tribal buffer zone.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails improved as highways during 17th century with primary N/S highway from Woburn to Andover as Main-Middlesex-Woburn Streets to Billerica as Shawshine Street and cross trail between Billerica and Salem as Salem Street.

B. Population:

No identified European settlement during this period.

C. Settlement Pattern:

On periphery of Woburn town development with some reported farmsteads by 1660s, apparently along central plain of Middlesex Avenue and meadowlands of Chestnut Street.

D. Economic Base:

Subsistence agriculture and fishing.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Location of meeting house at Middlesex and Glen Streets focuses existing highway network at town center. Few local connectors of 18th century, apparently cross roads as Forest, Boutwell, Buttels, Federal Streets with regional highway links to Billerica as Nichols Street and Wakefield as West Street.

B. Population:

Probably no significant population until after 1700. In 1732, church had 17 male members. By 1765 town population had reached 673 -- 97 families recorded in 94 houses.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Expansion of agricultural potential during late 17th century along main highways from Woburn to Billerica with north highland area subject to attack during Queen Anne's War in 1707. Town center formation along Middlesex Avenue plain during early 18th century with meeting house at Glen Street by 1732 and secondary core along Salem Street plain in North Wilmington by mid-18th century.

D. Economic Base:

Chiefly agriculture. Sawmill established by Daniel Snow about 1702 on Middlesex Avenue. One or two other mills probably established in this period, but sources are silent.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Wilmington retains a high proportion of 18th century houses, with an almost equal number of center and paired chimney (some of these may date after 1776) vernacular examples. Wilmington's earliest houses were built between 1715 and 1735; several houses appear to survive from this period including one integral lean-to end chimney half house on Chestnut Street and several other houses which, by their eccentric chimney placement off the ridge, seem to be early cottages, now enlarged. There are also several surviving center chimney cottages. Most of these are simply detailed structures, but a few highstyle Georgian houses, including one with a pedimented entrance bay, stand at the town center of Middlesex Avenue. At least one highstyle gambrel-roofed house (1725) is recorded, as is one gambrel-roofed cottage.

Institutional: The first meetinghouse was constructed in 1725 on Middlesex Avenue. That building, probably a simple gable roofed structure with a single porch, and several district schools are the only institutional buildings recorded; none are known extant.

Commercial: While a bakery was established at the Bond Skilton House as early as 1759, the Harnden Tavern, a hip roofed center chimney Georgian house on Salem Street, is the only known extant commercial structure.

Industrial: Frame grist and saw mills once stood east and west of Middlesex Avenue.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1776-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highways remain from mid-18th century with focus at meeting house. Improved connections between Merrimac and Boston as Main-Lowell Street turnpike and Middlesex Canal through Wilmington center with portions of original bed intact along Maple Meadow Brook.

B. Population:

Virtually no growth in the town in this period. Fluctuating population with figures rising and falling in successive decades, averaging about 740-750 throughout period.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Location of Middlesex Canal along Main-Shawshine Street axis refocuses town development to Wilmington center from meeting house core during early 19th century. Remainder of area continues as agricultural economy with small farmsteads along local highways.

D. Economic Base:

This was the "Hop Era" for Wilmington, which gave to the town its greatest period of agricultural, industrial, and commercial activity. Between 1806 and 1837 over 8,200 tons of hops were sent to Charlestown, valued at nearly \$2.2 million. Other forms of agriculture also practiced, in addition to stock raising. The Baldwin apple was reputedly discovered by a Middlesex Canal surveyor in the 1790s on the Butters Farm. After nearly 50 years of counter claims by neighboring towns for this discovery, a stone pillar was erected in 1895 to mark the spot.

Two sawmills, on Nod Pond and Silver Lake, and at least one grist mill (Ipswich River) were in operation during this period.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Some highstyle end chimney Federal houses stand at the town center and on Aldrich Street with other more modest center, rear wall and paired chimney examples in scattered locations on Salem and Chestnut Streets and Glen Road. Twin rear wall chimney Federal cottages were also built.

Institutional: A powderhouse was constructed on Middlesex Avenue in 1814 but does not survive.

Commercial: Some stores are indicated on Main Street and on Middlesex Avenue at Glen Road; these probably were confined to domestic settings. A tavern on Shawsheen Avenue at the Middlesex Canal is also recorded (1803) but none of these buildings are known to survive.

Industrial: A set of locks for the Middlesex Canal once stood off Main Street near Silver Lake.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Turnpikes and canal remain from early 19th century with continued improvement of Boston-Merrimac connections with early railroad corridor through Wilmington, with Boston and Lowell 1835 and branch north as Andover and Wilmington 1836, and link south from North Wilmington as Boston and Main 1844. Cross link as Salem and Lowell through North Wilmington 1850, now abandoned way. Local highway connections from Wilmington center as Wildwood, Church and Concord Streets during mid-19th century. Abandonment of Middlesex Canal with railroad competition during 1840s.

B. Population:

Very little growth in the town. Population reached a peak of 919 in 1860 -- a figure which it didn't reach again for twenty-years. The foreign-born population was quite small. Irish immigrants numbered 35 in 1865 -- about 4%.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Development along canal axis amplified with Boston & Lowell railroad along Main-Shawshine Streets and secondary core along Boston & Maine in North Wilmington during mid-19th century with modest suburban development on High and Church Streets from depots.

D. Economic Base:

Primarily agricultural economy. Three slaughterhouses were active in 1845, employing 10 men; ten years later employment in the slaughterhouses had doubled; and by 1865 the value of beef sent to market in Lynn and "the lower towns" was \$196,856. Many farms at this time had their own slaughterhouses. In 1865 there were 101 farms whose collective products were valued at \$266,288.

E. Architecture:

Residential: No highstyle Greek Revival houses were built, and only one highstyle Italianate house is known (1854, Middlesex Avenue at Church Street). Many simple sidehall Greek Revival houses and houses combining Greek Revival and Italianate elements were built along Chestnut, Lowell, and Woburn Streets and along Middlesex Avenue. The modest gable-roofed sidehall form remained in use throughout the period, acquiring some mild gable stick work toward the end of the period.

Institutional: A number of the town's institutional buildings were constructed during the period including the Greek Revival Baptist meetinghouse (1841), now the Town Hall; the Greek Revival/Italianate First Congregational Church (1865) and the West School, a Greek Revival/Italianate building on Shawsheen Avenue.

Commercial: A modest Greek Revival/Italianate depot was built for the Boston and Lowell Railroad in the 1840s; it survives in altered condition on Church Street.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Rail and road network remains from mid-19th century with extension of Woburn branch 1885. Electric trolley routes between Woburn, Billerica and Reading through Wilmington center by early 1900s on Main-Shawshine, and Lowell Streets with loop around Wildwood-Church Streets.

B. Population:

Small but steady growth in town population figures, particularly after 1890. (It is said that as late as 1890 there were less than 300 houses in the whole district.) By 1915 the population had nearly doubled the 1890 figure. Of those counted in 1905, about 19% were foreign-born, with Nova Scotia, English-speaking Canada, and Ireland the dominant nationalities represented.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Railroad corridors continue as focus of development with cores as Wilmington and North Wilmington depots linked by Middlesex Axis with status district around meeting house site at Glen Street during late 19th century. Expansion of trolley lines spurs modest residential development around Silver Lake by early 20th century along Main Street.

D. Economic Base:

Single largest industry in town was the tannery of Perry, Cutler & Company on Middlesex Avenue at Boston & Maine tracks. In 1875 the tannery produced over \$100,000 worth of leather. (There was a tannery here through the 1950s.) Fruit and vegetables continued to be grown in great abundance. After 1885 cranberry growing assumed major proportions and the crop remained a major source of income through the succeeding period. Large quantities of milk were also produced.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Modest sidehall Queen Anne houses continued to be the most prevalent house type. Only a few more ambitious houses (Queen Anne, Shingle Style, and Colonial Revival) were built, primarily along Church Street with very few houses overall being built after the turn of the century. Very modest Craftsman cottages were constructed, some probably by their original owners, at scattered locations off main routes. A single highstyle bungalow with a cobbled raised basement was built ("The Boulders", Salem Street, 1912).

Institutional: Wilmington's first high school, a Queen Anne/Stick Style building, was constructed in 1888; other institutional structures completed include Queen Anne and Shingle Style churches (Methodist, 1882; Baptist, c. 1890), a Queen Anne Masonic Temple (1885-89), and the Catholic Church (1887).

Commercial: A few one story storefronts along Main Street may date as early as the end of the period; certainly, Boston and Lowell railroad, the Stick Style depot was constructed during the period, c. 1890.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Abandonment of streetcar routes during 1920s and improvement of local roads as auto highways during 1930s with N/S Route 38 (Main Street), E/W Route 129 (Lowell-Shawshine Sts.) and Route 62 (Burlington-Church-Middlesex-Salem Streets) through Wilmington Center.

B. Population:

Population doubled during this period between 1915(2,330) and 1940(4,645), its greatest rise occurring in the period 1920-25. Since 1940 the population has more than quadrupled, particularly in the 15 years 1950-65 after the construction of Route 128 through Woburn and Burlington.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Orientation along railroad corridors is maintained through mid-20th century with small commercial centers at Wilmington and North Wilmington stations and residential growth along Middlesex Avenue axis. Status districts maintained around historic civic core on Church Street and on Salem Street plain, while residential subdivisions expanded around Silver Lake area. Commercial strip emerges along Shawshine-Main Street autohighway from town center with extension to Lowell Street.

D. Economic Base:

As the meat dressing industry moved west, the business of local slaughterhouses disappeared. Fruit and vegetables -- particularly the cranberry -- continued to be major sources of income. Milk production led farm produce, followed by eggs, hay and potatoes.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Very little construction took place during the period, with almost no highstyle buildings, a few modest Dutch Colonial and Colonial Revival houses, and more very simple cottages.

Institutional: Although no institutional structures are known to have been constructed, there may be one or two schools dating from the period.

Commercial: No notable commercial buildings constructed; surviving blocks are small scale one story utilitarian structures along Main Street.

Industrial: A few industrial buildings along Eames Street probably date as early as 1940; all are utilitarian structures, apparently of little note.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

The Middlesex Canal sections and Shawsheen Aqueduct (NR, 8/21/72) were the only remaining industrial or engineering structures observed in the town. However, unnoted by the town survey was the small Queen Anne railroad depot at Wilmington Centre.

XII. SOURCES

Bond, Arthur Thomas, Souvenir & Guide-Book to Points of Interest in Wilmington, MA (Wilmington, 1904).

Wilmington, Mass. 200th Anniversary Committee, Wilmington, Mass., Its Growth and Progress, 1730-1930 (n.p., 1930).

"Wilmington Scrapbook," with typed index by Mary Gowing Swain, Wilmington Public Library.