

# MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

## WRENTHAM

Report Date: 1980

**Reconnaissance Survey Town Reports**, produced for MHC's Statewide Reconnaissance Survey between 1979 and 1987, introduce the historical development of each of the Commonwealth's municipalities. Each report begins with an historic overview, a description of topography, and political boundaries. For the purposes of the survey, the historic period has been subdivided into seven periods: Contact (1500–1620), Plantation (1620–1675), Colonial (1675–1775), Federal (1775–1830), Early Industrial (1830–1870), Late Industrial (1870–1915), and Early Modern (1915–1940/55). Each report concludes with survey observations that evaluate the town's existing historic properties inventory and highlight significant historic buildings, settlement patterns, and present threats to these resources. A bibliography lists key secondary resources.

Town reports are designed for use together with a series of town maps that demarcate settlement patterns, transportation corridors and industrial sites for each historic period. These maps are in the form of color-coded, polyester overlays to the USGS topographic base map for each town on file and available for consultation at MHC. For further information on the organization and preparation of town reports, readers should contact MHC.

Users should keep in mind that these reports are now two decades or more old. The information they contain, including assessments of existing knowledge, planning recommendations, understanding of local development, and bibliographic references all date to the time they were written. In some cases, information on certain topics was not completed. No attempt has been made to update this information.

Electronic text was not available for digital capture, and as a result most of the reports have been scanned as PDF files. While all have been processed with optical character recognition, there will inevitably be some character recognition errors.

The activity that is the subject of the MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report has been financed in part with Federal funds from the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. However, the contents and opinions do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of the Interior. This program receives Federal financial assistance for identification and protection of historic properties. Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Age Discrimination Act of 1975, as amended, the U.S. Department of the Interior prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, disability or age in its federally assisted programs. If you believe you have been discriminated against in any program, activity or facility as described above, or if you desire further information please write to: Office of Equal Opportunity, National Park Service, 1849 C Street, N.W., Washington, D.C., 20240.



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# MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

Date: February 1980

Community: Wrentham

## I. TOPOGRAPHY

Located on irregular, occasionally hilly upland terrain. Some north/south grain to landscape from glacial scouring. Areas of rocky outcrop as well as outwash features. Generally a gravelly soil. Located in watershed area: three large lakes in central part of town drain north into Charles River; several of smaller ponds south drain south towards Narragansett Bay. Extensive bog and swamp in lower elevations throughout town.

## II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Part of Dedham grant, 1636. Plantation established at 'Wollomonopoag', 1663. Incorporated as town of Wrentham, 1673. Became East (First) Precinct of Wrentham, 1937. Southeast section annexed from Dorchester grant (Stoughton), 1753. Town boundaries and size diminished by formation of new towns: Franklin (1778), Norfolk (1820) and Plainville (1908).

## III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Historic suburban town on Boston-Providence axis at headwaters of Charles River. Important focus of regional trails around attractive ponds with native sites at Lake Pearl. Settlement attempt during mid-17th century from Boston delayed by King Philip's War with establishment of town center by late 17th century. Expansion of agricultural economy during Colonial period with many well-preserved houses of 18th century around town center and farm cottages in outlying areas. Development of craft industries from Rhode Island during early 19th century with innovation centers for straw bonnets and jewelry at Sheldonville and West Wrentham, both characteristic period villages. Gradual shift of agriculture to specialty poultry for urban markets by early 20th century with some surviving period structures of impressive size. Town center retains village scale, with historic period buildings while rural landscape is increasingly pressured by suburban development along interstate highways.

## IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

### A. Transportation Routes:

Located on divide between Charles and Ten Mile Rivers with important junction of regional trails around Lakes Archer and Pearl (native site). E/W route is conjectured to follow East-Franklin Streets (Route 140) and N/S route as Shears-South Streets (Route 1A), both through Wrentham Center. Possible branches are conjectured as Everett Street to South Walpole and axis of Taunton Street around Knuckup Hill and Hawthorne Brook to Plainville. There is also a likelihood that a cross trail followed Thurston Street around the Foxborough highlands. It would seem probable that a trail extended from Wampum Center to Sheldonville and West Wrentham but its location along West Street (Route 121) is doubtful.

### B. Settlement Pattern:

One site with documented period occupation at Lake Pearl outlet.

Other sites probably on well-drained terraces and knolls adjacent both to major lakes and smaller ponds.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Fresh water fishing in lakes and ponds. Limited agriculture. Hunting/gathering in both uplands and lowlands.

D. Observations:

Frustratingly little information available. Period sites are highly probable given environmental diversity around lakes. Sites would most likely be Nipmuck related, however, area is on boundary between fresh-water inland people (Nipmuck) and coastal tribes to southeast and south.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails remain as primary highways to Wrentham during mid-17th century with Franklin-East and Shears-South Streets as main roads to town center before King Philip's War.

B. Population:

Some native inhabitants around major lakes -- claimed to be Wampanoag or 'Taunton' Indians. Perhaps a dozen colonial families by end of period.

C. Settlement:

Colonial occupation attempted, 1663. House lots laid out east of Great Pond (Lake Pearl). A failure -- one family remained. Resettled 1669 on high ground on West Street (St. Mary's church area).

D. Economic Base:

Settled to exploit local resources, particularly meadowland (hay) and lumber. Some exploration for a 'metal mine' in the Miscoe Meadow area.

E. Observations:

Main thrust of colonial expansion southwest from Dedham. A small, fragile frontier community.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1676-1776)

A. Transportation Routes:

Reformation of Wrentham center in late 17th century around existing highways. Main road to Rhode Island extended as West Street (Route 121) to West Wrentham by 18th century with several N/S links as Cherry, Burnt Swamp, Williams, Spring and Arnold Streets. Similar network developed

around Lake Pearl and Bald Hill as Chestnut, Bennet and Whiting Streets, with cross roads to Norfolk as Park Street and Hawes Street to Plainville.

B. Population:

Evacuated during King Philip's War. Slow regrowth to end of 17th century. 68 taxpayers listed in 1704. Steady growth during 18th century. Census of 1765 listed 2030 inhabitants in 347 families and 293 houses (figures include Norfolk, Franklin and Plainville as well).

C. Settlement:

Town abandoned 1676 and burned by natives. Slowly rebuilt after 1680. First meetinghouse begun 1682, finished around 1695. First school built 1702 (most schooling done on a rotational basis in houses throughout town). Village extends south along West Street and north/west along Shears and Franklin Streets. Second meetinghouse built 1721. Remained a fairly compact village. A secondary focus developed around Baptist meetinghouse, 1769 (West and Williams Streets).

D. Economic Base:

Agriculture and grazing. Primary common lands located between Lakes Pearl and Archer. Lumbering, especially cedar. Some local milling: gristmill on Lake Pearl outlet, 1685; a sawmill added later.

E. Architecture:

Residential: High-style unlikely to have been built here; vernacular building divided between an approximately equal number of central-chimney two-storey houses and central-chimney Cape Cod cottages; at least three central-chimney cottages with gambrel roofs were built, all are associated with early and mid-18th century construction dates.

Commercial: Reputed ca. 1770 tavern, one-storey high, asymmetrical facade.

F. Observations:

Early in period, a struggling frontier town. Stabilized during early 18th century and developed as primary town in area.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highways remain from 18th century. Turnpikes along Boston-Providence axis opened by early 19th century as Route 1 around High Rock Hill and Dedham Street to Wrentham center (Route 1A). Secondary roads of period include Beech Street and North Street to Norfolk.

B. Population:

Rapid growth until ca. 1820, after which population fluctuated in 2,800-2,900 range (Note: these totals include the towns of Norfolk and

Plainville which were then a part of Wrentham); very small French and Irish population (1790s), some Catholic mission work performed but no parish established; Baptist Society (organized 1769) in western part of town active through part of period.

C. Settlement Locations:

Major village developed at Wrentham Center, secondary villages at Sheldonville (post 1820s) and Wampum Corner; scattered linear development along West Street.

D. Economic Base:

Predominantly agricultural economy, except on Mill River, the only major water power source in town. Wolomopogge Manufacturing Co. (Eagle Cotton Factory) incorporated 1814 at earlier grist and sawmill site. Like Foxborough immediately to east. Wrentham made early start in straw braid and bonnet miking (1799). Earliest factory, Fisher, Day & Co. ca. 1804 (Warner).

E. Architecture:

Residential: Central chimney cottages and full two-storey central-chimney houses built throughout period in outlying locations and in small villages of Sheldonville, West Wrentham and Wampum Corner; some central chimney cottages built at Wrentham center; however, most numerous type in the vicinity of Wrentham center was twin-chimney two-storey house with symmetrical center entrance facade; very few hip-roofed examples evident. Small number of late Georgian decorative details present at center, associated with dates in 1780s; high-style Federalist decorative trim most abundant at town center and major roads close to the center.

Institutional: No new meetinghouses with possible exception of Baptists (1770s?) at West Wrentham. By 1820s, 18 school districts in town (including modern Plainville and Norfolk), it is probable that only nine or ten of these districts were within the bounds of modern Wrentham, secondary sources do not describe public schools for period. Private academies founded 1776 (West Wrentham) and 1806 (Center -- Federalist style two-storey wood-frame academy building built 1806).

Commercial: Probable development at center and along West Street -- no buildings described in sources.

Industrial: Small frame straw shops, probably sharing space with residential or commercial uses.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highways remain in place from early 19th century. No railroads through the area during this period.

B. Population:

Moderate growth during period; decline between 1865 and 1870 reflected separation of Norfolk; small foreign-born population, predominantly Irish. New religious societies formed include: Universalist Society (re-organized at West Wrentham -- 1830s), Baptist Society (re-organized at Sheldonville -- 1843), Roman Catholic mission (ca. 1853), and Protestant Episcopal Parish (ca. 1864 -- Wrentham center).

C. Settlement Location:

Same as in preceding period with densest linear settlement along West and East Streets near Wrentham center, and at Sheldonville.

D. Economic Base:

Boat-building begun in Sheldonville ca. 1830 by Colonel Rhodes Sheldon, who transported them to Boston for sale. At least one competitor existed in the 1870s and the industry appears to have been a thriving one -- despite the town's distance from the sea -- for most of the century. The number of straw factories grew apace, both at the center and at Sheldonville. Manufacture of boots and shoes also undertaken but by the end of the period was apparently declining due to competition from neighboring towns.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Most wide-spread style of period was Greek Revival of which central chimney and side-hall cottages are the most numerous; moderate number of astylistic mid-Victorian side-hall cottages scattered throughout town, few examples of Italianate or Second Empire styles; small amount of possible wood-frame workers' row-housing (Sheldonville -- ca. 1845). High-style of period largely restricted to West and East Streets at center, examples include both houses and cottages, several examples of each of the following styles exist: Greek Revival, Italianate (1860s), Second Empire (ca. 1867-75).

Institutional: Greek Revival style meetinghouses built 1834 (Congregationalist) and 1843 (Baptist); Catholic chapel built in former shoe factory (1859); Italianate style alterations to 1834 meetinghouse (1860s); wood-frame one-room schoolhouses probably built during period; high-school established in existing building (1867), school districts abolished 1869.

Commercial: At least two temple-front two-storey commercial buildings stood at center (1840s-59s); similar plan building constructed with ornate two-storey porch (ca. 1860); one-storey gable facade store buildings likely to have been built along West Street.

Industrial: Predominantly wood-frame shop buildings, one and two-storeys high.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Belated railroad connections to Boston and Providence. Branch line

through West Wrentham (1877), now abandoned. Mainline through Wrentham center (1892) along N/S axis with original steel bridges intact. Trolley routes through Wrentham center by early 1900s to Franklin on Franklin Street with original roadbed intact near Eagle Brook, to Foxborough on East Street and to Plainville on South Street.

B. Population:

Small increases likely to have occurred in general population; however, much of growth reported ca. 1875-1900 was actually located in Plainville; after 1905 much of increase was due to growth of resident population at Wrentham State School. Methodist Society organized 1880s; Catholic Parish organized, 1889.

C. Settlement Locations:

Major new settlement in north-central part of town along Franklin Street, Shears Street (Wrentham State School), and in summer cottage colonies around three lakes (after ca. 1910).

D. Economic Base:

Manufacture of straw hats and bonnets reached peak in this period -- by 1890 annual product valued at \$250,000. Agriculture and poultry-raising significant toward end of period.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Little high-style present; most late 19th century building restricted to side-hall cottages with a small number of ambitious Colonial Revival and late Queen Anne style houses at the head of Lake Archer (Franklin Street) and along East Street. Early 20th century building consists of bungalows and two-storey houses with bungalow-type details (Franklin Street) and some extremely modest summer cabins.

Institutional: Victorian Gothic style Episcopal Church (1872); schools gradually centralized after 1869, Second Empire style school and town office building at center (ca. 1872-76), only four schoolhouses in active use by 1906-07; Colonial Revival style school and town office building at center (1896); public library built 1895-96; firehouse at Sheldonville ca. 1910-15. Development of State School begun, 1905-07, opened 1910, buildings predominantly brick and stucco, Colonial/Classical Revival style.

Commercial: Several free-standing wood-frame commercial blocks, Queen Anne style, at town center; several one-storey row storefronts (ca. 1910) at town center; only one railroad station (West Wrentham) before 1888.

Industrial: Two and three storey, utilitarian wood-frame buildings, some possibly brick -- no major complexes developed.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Streetcar lines abandoned by 1920s with West Wrentham railroad. Auto highway routes along existing roads with primary N/S link to Boston-Providence as Route One 1930s superhighway, secondary N/S Route 1A and primary E/W Route 140 through Wrentham center. Connecting link to Rhode Island as Route 121 (West Street) through Sheldonville and West Wrentham.

B. Population:

Rapid growth throughout period, due, in part, to State School.

C. Settlement Locations:

Same as preceding period.

D. Economic Base:

In addition to poultry-raising, for which there were a number of large farms, the only major new business was Winter Brothers machine shop, a manufacturer of gauges and valves at Wrentham center.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Little or no high-style likely; bungalows most widely built, small numbers of Colonial Revival style houses and cottages also built; summer lakeside cabins tended to be astylistic and of inexpensive construction.

Institutional: Only one schoolhouse built -- at center 1935-36, probably resulted in full centralization of school system into two schoolhouses at center; firehouse built at center by 1926; State School expanded within the parcel purchased in 1905.

Commercial: Limited development of one-storey store fronts at town center; little new construction.

Industrial: Brick and concrete factory, Moderne/International style built near railroad bed at town center developed between ca. 1920 and 1940.

XI. SOURCES

Fiore, Jordan Domenic, Wrentham, 1673-1973: A History (1973).

Warner, Samuel, "History of the Towns" (of Wrentham and Norfolk) in Directory of Wrentham and Norfolk (1890).



#### WRENTHAM SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

The current survey of Wrentham includes approximately 50 buildings, most of which are houses located at the town's center; in addition, the survey includes two churches, one school and three commercial buildings; no industrial buildings are included. The survey covers most of the town's high-style examples of Greek Revival, Italianate and Second Empire styles of architecture. Outlying areas are not included in the existing survey.

Future survey work should focus on identifying Colonial period farmhouses of which a relatively large number remain in the western part of the town. In addition the early nineteenth century villages of Sheldonville and Wampum Corner should be surveyed, as both retain much of their pre-1850 characters. Additional survey should also include 18th century to early 20th century buildings along Franklin Street. Any survey of the Wrentham State School should identify the complex's historical place in the development of state-run schools, rather than judge it solely on its local significance. Two structures from Sheldonville's boat-building days also appear to survive.