

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

WESTPORT

Report Date: 1981

Associated Regional Report: Southeast 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.



MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
William Francis Galvin, Secretary of the Commonwealth
Chair, Massachusetts Historical Commission
220 Morrissey Blvd.
Boston, MA 02125
www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc
mhc@sec.state.ma.us / 617-727-8470

MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

Date: November 1981

Community: Westport

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Westport has a very deeply indented coastline with drainage via the east and west branches of the Westport River, Westport harbor being protected by the dunes at Horseneck beach. The terrain is rolling with uplands between the two branches of the Westport River. Soils are generally sandy to gravelly.

II. Political Boundaries

Westport was incorporated as a town from part of Dartmouth on July 2, 1787. Parts of Dartmouth were annexed in 1793, 1795 and 1805. Bounds between Westport and Dartmouth were established in 1828. Westport received some territory in the settlement of the Rhode Island/Massachusetts boundary dispute in 1861. The boundary between Westport and Fall River was located and defined in 1894.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Westport is a pastoral community on the Rhode Island border. Caught between New Bedford and Fall River, the town has managed to retain an almost 18th century ambience.

During the first part of the federal period Westport Point was a satellite of the New Bedford whaling industry, the remainder of the town being primarily agricultural. Head of Westport served as a break of bulk point and distribution center for the town. With the exception of Westport Factory the town retained its agricultural focus during the 19th century. While the Watuppa branch of the Old Colony Railroad passed through the town in the 1870s, the impact was minimal as the railroad bypassed virtually all existing population centers. The Dartmouth and Westport Street Railway (1894), on the other hand, opened north Westport to mild suburbanization from Fall River. In the 1880s Westport Harbor began discrete development as a summer resort, an activity which continues in the town to this day. Summer resort development in Westport is basically atypical of Buzzard's Bay in that it is of generally low density and unpretentious architecture. The development of Horseneck Beach as a State Reservation and the construction of Route 88 to the beach has greatly increased accessibility in the town and opened the way for increased development.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500 - 1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

The native trail system in present Westport paralleled the area's major waterways and eventually converged on the coast. The only documented

native trail was the Old Rhode Island Way which ran between Plymouth and Newport, Rhode Island. This route is thought to have passed through the Head of Westport possibly on the Old County Road. A probable primary north-south native trail extended along Davis, Gifford and Drift Roads providing access to the East Branch and Westport Harbor. An alternate route to Westport Harbor may have been established east of and parallel to Sanford Road and extended along an unimproved road, a portion of Old County Road and Main Street. A native trail extending along the east side of the East Branch may have been oriented on Pine Hill, New Pine Hill and Horseneck Roads. Two conjectured native trails paralleled the west and east sides of the West Branch and followed Old Harbor and Cornell Roads, respectively. The East and West Branches would have provided the natives with an excellent means of transportation to Westport's coast and interior.

B. Settlement Patterns:

There were no reported native Contact Period sites. The only recorded archaeological sites were five unidentified native locations situated in close proximity to the lower portion of the Westport River. Two of these sites were located near the eastern bank of the West Branch while a third was discovered a short distance north of Westport Point. The two remaining sites were found on the east bank of the East Branch at the river's mouth and opposite Great Island, respectively. One source stated native settlement was concentrated at the mouths of Old Dartmouth's three major rivers--Westport, Paskamanset, Acushnet--at the time of the appearance of the area's first settlers. Heavy native settlement probably extended up the East and West Branches in addition to the readily accessible river islands. These locations were particularly conducive to settlement because of the availability of a diverse marine and riverine resource base, potential planting grounds and transportation routes. Interior sites were probably established during the cooler fall, winter and early spring months adjacent to the upper portion of the East Branch and Devols and South Watuppa Ponds.

C. Subsistence Patterns:

Native subsistence rounds probably focused on Westport's coast and the mouth of the Westport River (East and West Branches), particularly during the late spring and summer. A large variety of fish, shellfish and marine mammals were readily available in this area. In addition, 16th century and early 17th century European-Indian trade probably was undertaken on or near the Westport coast. Bartholomew Gosnold reputedly set foot on the Old Dartmouth coast (Gooseberry Neck, Westport; Round Hill, Dartmouth) when visiting local natives in 1602 (Hurd 1883:191). English trade goods were exchanged for native furs. Additional native fishing likely occurred further up the East Branch, the Westport River's numerous interior tributaries and Devols and South Watuppa Ponds primarily during the late fall, winter and early spring. Potential planting grounds were most prolific along the banks of the West and East Branches and the interior of southern Westport.

D. Observations:

Westport fell within a region of heavy native Contact period settlement which stretched from Narragansett Bay to Buzzard's Bay. The political boundaries

of the Old Dartmouth natives appeared to be defined by river drainages with the Westport area natives designated the Acoaxsets. The Acoaxsets along with the neighboring Apponagansetts and Acushnets (present Dartmouth and New Bedford, Fairhaven/Acushnet respectively) came within the domain of the Pokanokets (Wampanoags) centered in Mount Hope, Rhode Island. There is a good likelihood of extant archaeological evidence of Contact period settlement along the coast, the mouth of the Westport River and the banks of the East and West Branches because of the relatively limited development in these areas. Additional archaeological evidence probably survives in the vicinity of the light-moderately developed Devols and South Watuppa Ponds.

V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620 - 1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails were probably utilized as part of the colonial road system. Development of this system was probably limited since English pre-war settlement was minimal. The overland routes were likely utilized as access routes to local agricultural, meadow and timber land and regional thoroughfares.

B. Population:

There are no available figures for Westport's native or white populations. The area probably had a considerable native population, particularly since Westport appeared to lack a substantial English population.

C. Settlement Patterns:

The available data make no reference to native settlement locations. English pre-war settlement apparently was confined to Westport Point and Horseneck Beach as a protective measure against Indian attack (Old Dartmouth Historical Society 1908:17). This area was probably settled between the early 1650s (original division of Old Dartmouth) and 1765. The majority of Old Dartmouth's pre-war settlers established homes in present Dartmouth, Fairhaven and Acushnet (Ricketson 1858:).

D. Economic Base:

No data concerning the native or white economies. The Westport area settlers were probably engaged primarily in subsistence farming and fishing. Lumbering was likely undertaken in present Westport's extensive woodlands.

E. Observations:

Both the pre-war native and white communities are poorly understood. The limited data suggest the existing white community was a fringe settlement situated on the western periphery of Old Dartmouth.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675 - 1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Minimal documentation of the development of the area's post-war road system. Operation of a ferry at the site of the present Hix Bridge was initiated prior to 1707. The ferry facilitated transportation between the western and eastern portions of the Westport area. The ferry was replaced by a bridge built on the

same site between c. 1738 and 1745 by William Hix. The Reed Road may have been laid out in response to the early 18th century construction of mills northeast of Head of Westport.

B. Population:

There were no figures for the native or white population. By 1765, Old Dartmouth (included Westport until 1787) had a population of 4,506 residents. This figure increased to 6,773 (50%) in 1776. The Westport area, as did most of Old Dartmouth, received a heavy influx of Quakers from southeastern Massachusetts and the Narragansett Bay region.

C. Settlement Patterns:

It is unclear what remained of the native community after King Philip's War. A large number of Old Dartmouth natives were sold into slavery in the West Indies (Old Dartmouth Historical Society 1908:17).

The white community in the Westport area was probably hard hit during the war. Of the thirty homes present in Old Dartmouth in 1675, only two survived the Anglo-Indian conflict. In addition, several residents were killed. Post-war settlement took place shortly after the war's end with the establishment of a settlement node at Head of Westport and a number of homes south of this node in the vicinity of Drift Road. By the early 18th century, a settlement node had probably developed to the south in the vicinity of Central Village, the location of the Westport area's first Quaker meetinghouse (pre-1761). Additional early 18th century homes were erected on Westport Point and Horseneck Beach. A second Quaker meetinghouse was built in c. 1761 at the junction of Old County Road and Main Road, probably in response to 18th century settlement expansion west of Head of Westport.

D. Economic Base:

No documentation of native economic activities. The available sources provide little insight into the white community's economic base. Agriculture continued as a primary facet of the Westport area's economy. The first documentation of local mill industry occurred in the early 18th century. George Lawton, Benjamin Waite and John Teipp established an industrial corporation interested in developing a mill complex north of the Head of Westport in 1712 (Hutt 1924: 821). The corporation was probably responsible for the construction of a saw mill and grist mill which appeared on the 1795 town map northeast of the junction of Old County Road and the East Branch. An additional grist mill and iron forge indicated on the same map slightly northeast (East Branch) of the previous mills may also pre-date 1775. A grist mill and wind mill situated west of the junction of Horseneck Road and an un-named stream (east of Cadman Neck) and Westport Point, respectively, may have pre-1775 construction dates (Westport map, 1795). Although not documented, it is likely some pre-1775 small draft ship construction took place on the shores of the West or East Branches when considering the ease of access to Buzzard's Bay and the waterways well sheltered location.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Approximately a half dozen houses of the Colonial period were observed in Westport along with a similar number of period cottages. All of

these are isolated examples located along early roads or at cross roads locations; period houses were observed at Giffords Corner, Head of Westport and along Drift Road. Other Colonial period houses are known at Acoaxet. Several plan types were observed including three-quarter and half-plan houses and cottages as well as houses with the more common five-bay, center-chimney plan. Also observed was a center-chimney house with an integral lean-to at Giffords Corner and an L-plan center-chimney house with a half hip roof at Head of Westport. The earliest houses at Westport appear to have been cottages, with at least one example, the Coggeshall House, a gambrel-roofed center-chimney cottage, known to survive, although it has been moved to Newport, Rhode Island. The Handy House at Handy Four Corners has portions dating to 1714 although it did not achieve its full eight-bay double chimney status until 1794; pedimented entrance surrounds on the Handy House are some of the only Georgian details observed in the town.

Institutional: A Friends meetinghouse was established at Central Village in 1766 and another Friends meetinghouse is known to have been in existence prior to that time. Neither of these survives.

F. Observations:

Post-war Westport's physical growth was characterized by dispersed, decentralized settlement. This settlement pattern was primarily due to the presence of two major waterways which divided a considerable portion of the area and Westport's extreme length. The existing community was part of a regionally important Quaker population center encompassing Old Dartmouth and southeastern Narragansett Bay settlements. The Westport area's large population of former Narragansett Bay residents and its proximity to this region suggest there were close economic and social ties between these two areas. It is highly probable that archaeological evidence of period settlement survives in the vicinity of Westport Point, Central Village, Gifford's Corner and Head of Westport due to the light-moderate development in these neighborhoods.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775 - 1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Improvement of existing colonial roads, no new road construction.

B. Population:

Population figures unavailable prior to incorporation in 1787. After a slight decline between 1790 and 1800, slow growth to the end of the period.

C. Settlement:

Principle village at Head of Westport with secondary centers at Westport Point in the south and Westport Factory in the north. Remainder of settlement consisted of farmsteads along existing colonial roads and a crossroads hamlet at Central Village.

D. Economic Base:

Period of growth for both Westport Point and Head of Westport. At the Point, active fishing industry begun by 1775, transformed by early 19th century into nascent whaling port. First whaling voyage on record from the Point in 1806. By 1837, five whalers recorded. Both fishing and whaling supported shipyards at Point and Head of Westport.

Inland manufacturers transformed under influence of New Bedford demands for timber and iron. William Gifford and Lemuel Milk, 1789, engaged Josiah Leonard as 1/3 partner in forge producing iron implements for New Bedford whalers. Six years later privileges purchased by New Bedford whaling magnate William Rotch along with grist and saw mills as part of integrated whaling industry.

Westport Cotton Mfg. Co. begun 1812 though industry experienced nearly continuous financial difficulties and frequent changes of ownership. Existing stone mill ("Upper Mill," or "Mill No. 1") built 1826.

E. Architecture:

Residential: The earliest clustered settlements began to develop in the period at Head of Westport, Westport Point and Central Village. Center chimney houses and cottages continued to be built along outlying roads, but in the emerging villages, somewhat more sophisticated houses began to be built. Most of these are three-quarter plan houses with pedimented entrance surrounds containing fanlights. The prevalence of three-quarter plan houses is notable and apparently relates to other residential architecture along the coast. Another popular feature on period houses and cottages are splayed lintels; these remained popular through the period and into the Early Industrial period.

Institutional: The first town house built in 1789 shortly after the town's incorporation in 1787. Shown on the 1830 map are five meetinghouses, two Friends, two Baptist and one Methodist, and ten schools. Of these structures, only the Friends meetinghouse at Central Village, built in 1818 at a cost of \$1,198, still stands. The first Christian church was founded and built its first church in 1823; this denomination grew out of the Baptist church in Westport.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830 - 1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Improvement of existing roads, no new road construction.

B. Population:

Population remained relatively stable to end of period. Foreign born population in 1855 1% of total.

C. Settlement:

Little or no expansion of settlement during this period due to extreme stability of the population.

D. Economic Base:

Period was Westport's era of greatest economic expansion, as whaling reached its peak in 1850s. By 1855, 22 whale ships were employed in whale fishery, employing 462 men and netting \$105,000 worth of sperm oil. By the 1830s, cod sloops primarily transformed into coasting vessels, hauling oil to New York and returning to the Point with supplies of every description. With the discovery of petroleum, whaling declined sharply. By 1865 there were only 10 vessels, though sperm oil still brought in \$119,000. By 1875 there were no whaling operations recorded.

Acquisitions in this period of the Westport Cotton Factory by a company led by William Trafford brought new prosperity to the Factory area, and in succeeding decades the company built factory store and employee housing.

E. Architecture:

Residential: The largest number of residential structures constructed in the town were constructed in the Early Industrial period. These include most of the houses built at Westport Point and at Head of Westport. Among these are a number of traditional center and end chimney plan center-entrance cottages with Greek Revival details; one particularly well-preserved grouping of period workers' cottages stands at Head of Westport on Drift Road. The sidehall plan was very popular in the period as well, however, and a great many sidehall Greek Revival and Italianate cottages and houses were in the town, particularly at Westport Point. A common decorative element in Greek Revival houses of the town are small one-light windows in the frieze. Toward the end of the period, kneewall framing became quite common for Italianate cottages, a fair number of which were built across the town. Among the most elaborate residences built in the period are a one-story granite Greek Revival cottage with a low monitor attic embellishing a gable roof and a tetrastyle Doric portico across the facade (Howland House, 1830) and a square Italianate villa at Head of Westport, notable for the projection of roundhead windows up into the bracketted cornice. Cottages with Gothic Revival trim of barge-boards and prominent central gables began to be built in limited numbers during the period.

Institutional: A number of schools and churches were built in the period. Churches established included the second Christian (South Westport), 1838, the third Christian, Brownell's Corner, 1843, the first Christian, North Westport, 1858, and the third Christian, Westport, 1839, as well as the Pacific Union Congregational, 1855. Of these, the Pacific Union church (1855), a two-story Greek Revival structure with Romanesque Revival elements, and the First Christian church (1857) at North Westport, a more traditional one-story church with a square one-stage belfry, are the only two known standing. In addition, at least two schools still stand; the Wolf Pit school (1841) on Old County Road, a one-story Greek Revival building unusual for its overhanging Doric portico and the Bell School (1848) on Drift Road, a well detailed two-story Greek Revival school with a square belfry at the gable end. Other schools may still stand converted to residential use.

XI. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870 - 1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Watuppa Branch of the Old Colony Railroad through the northern portion of town in 1872. New Fall River Road (Route 6) laid out during this period. Dartmouth and Westport Street Railway (1894) connected Westport with New Bedford and Fall River.

B. Population:

Slight increase in 1870-80, decline to 1890, then slow increase to end of the period. Foreign born population increases from 11% of total in 1883 to 20% in 1915.

C. Settlement:

As in the early industrial period there was very little expansion of existing settlements during this period, although there appears to have been some resort development at Westport Point.

D. Economic Base:

With the disappearance of whaling, Westport turned increasingly to agriculture and fishing to accomodate needs of neighboring cities. Along the coast in the later decades of the period summer resort colonies sprang up. Carriage making took up the slack after the disappearance of shipyards: in 1875 four carriage makers were recorded. George H. Gifford invented a popular machine for turning carriage spokes.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Modest Italianate houses and cottages, most with the sidehall plan, continued to be built in some numbers, particularly at Westport Point, Central Village, and North Westport. A few mansard roof cottages were also built at Head of Westport and Westport Point. Very few Queen Anne houses were built in the town, although some very late examples of the Italianate incorporate elements of the Queen Anne style. After the turn of the century, limited resort development at Acoaxet and Westport Point initiated the construction of a few Shingle Style and Colonial Revival houses at both locations. More modest residential construction occurred at North Westport along Sanford and Gifford Roads where one story Colonial Revival and Craftsman workers' cottages were built as part of Fall River's suburban development.

Institutional: Several of the town's institutional structures date from the Late Industrial period. These consist primarily of several shingled Colonial Revival schools, one story in height with hip roofs, at Westport Point and North Westport.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915 - 1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

New Fall River Road improved and designated Route 6 during this period. Improvement of existing roads.

B. Population:

Population increase continues from 1915 to 1930 with substantial increase between 1920 and 1930, then decrease between 1930 and 1940. Foreign born population remains at 20% in 1930.

C. Settlement:

Settlement expansion that did occur consisted of residential infill along existing roads in the southern portion of the town and along the Dartmouth-Westport Street Railway line in North Westport.

D. Economic Base:

Westport's primary industry for most of the period was that of the Westport Cotton Manufacturing Company, by 1923 producing 1.5 million pounds of cloth annually. Westport Point, connected to Horseneck Beach by a causeway in 1923, was now almost entirely a summer resort community. The period was brought to a close by the hurricane of 1938, rated as among the costliest disasters in U.S. history. Worst hit were said to be Horseneck Beach, washing out virtually the entire community of expensive summer homes, and Westport Harbor.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Residential development was limited during the period and consists primarily of small workers' houses and cottages at North Westport, along Sanford and Gifford Roads and also along Route 6. Most of these are one and two story hip or gambrel roof structures with one story porches, exposed rafters in the Craftsman manner and otherwise simple detailing.

Institutional: The only known institutional buildings of the period are Our Lady of Grace Church, a one-story Colonial Revival structure dating from the 1930s, on Sanford Road, and the Town Hall at Central Village, a two-story brick Colonial Revival building.

Commercial: Most of the commercial buildings in the town date from the Early Modern period and most are simple one-story frame buildings located along Route 6 and at Head of Westport, Central Village and Westport Point.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS:

Westport's survey includes only structures within proposed historic districts at Head of Westport and Westport Point; outlying structures are not included.

Industrial: The town's limited survey includes her major industrial landmark, the Westport Mfg. Company's Upper Mill, though not the lower mill on Forge Pond. MDPW's survey of bridges in Westport has identified two of an apparently large number of stone-slab bridges, other examples of which may still survive in the town.

XII. SOURCES

Hale, Katherine Stanley and Mary H. Sowle, The Village of Westport Point, Massachusetts (New Bedford, 1914).

Hurd, Duane Hamilton, "Westport," in his History of Norfolk County, Massachusetts (Phila., 1883), pp.678-707.

Old Home Week at the Head of Westport, Massachusetts, August 23-28, 1908
(Westport, 1908).

Smith, Frederick T., A Look at Westport through Four Centuries (Westport, 1976).