

# MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

## WESTFORD

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: April, 1980

COMMUNITY: Westford

## I. TOPOGRAPHY

Located on rolling, occasionally rugged upland terrain. Some exposed bedrock but glacial outwash features, especially drumlins and kettle lakes, predominate. Gravelly to rocky soil. An upland watershed area. Northern three-quarters of town including numerous ponds drain NE via Stony Brook into Merrimack; southern quarter drains south into Assabet. Large areas of bog/swamp, especially in southern half of town.

## II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Part of Chelmsford plantation, 1655. Expanded by Three-Mile grant, 1656. Became west precinct of Chelmsford, 1724. Established as Town of Westford, 1729. Section (including Forge Pond) annexed from Groton, 1730.

## III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Suburban industrial town on periphery of Boston suburban expansion. Located on intermediate highlands between Nashua and Concord Rivers with numerous local brooks and ponds. Native sites suspected along axis of Stony, Beaver and Nashoba Brooks with reported burial site on Frances Hill and fishing camp at Forge Pond. Early corridor of settlement to Nashua valley during mid-17th century with local mill sites along Stony Brook before King Philip's War. Town center formation from Groton and Chelmsford by mid-18th century with hill site location. Agricultural activity on upland areas with several Colonial period houses of early date, including some brick examples. Water power potential along Stony Brook created sequence of mill centers, by early 19th century at Nabnasset, Graniteville and Forge Village, with local quarrying of granite for Boston market in northeast section along Chelmsford line. Town center retains civic focus with well preserved collection of Federal period buildings including local academy and brickend high-style houses. Mill villages remain small scale centers of mid-19th century date, including original stone factories of towered design at Graniteville and brick Victorian example at Forge Village. Proximity to Lowell and Ayer by early 20th century creates resort landscape around Nabnasset Pond with trolley roadbed intact to Graniteville. Recent access to Boston highway system has created increasing pressure of residential development. However, much of area retains authentic period character including town center and mill villages with pockets of original agricultural landscape throughout town.

## IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

### A. Transportation Routes:

Located on intermediate highland between Merrimack and Nashua Rivers. Trail routes follow northeast topographic grain between river valleys with conjectured possibilities as Plain-Coldspring and Forge Village Roads along Stony Brook to Forge Pond (native site), Old Lowell-Concord Roads around

Nonset and Nashoba Brooks from Heart Pond (Chelmsford) to Forge Pond with possible branches to west as Littleton and Boston Roads, and loop from Heart Pond to Stony Brook over Frances Hill (native site) as Chamberlain Road. Other trail routes appear to link ponds in north section with likely candidates as Depot-Tyngsboro and Forest Hill Roads around Nabnasset Pond to Stony Brook and perhaps Prescott-North-Gould and Tenny-Wing-Nutting Roads around Keyes and Long-Sough-for Ponds. Link from Forge Pond to Nashua River (Ayer) follows W. Prescott Street from Forge Village.

B. Settlement Pattern:

No documented sites, however, sites are probable along Stony Brook and adjacent to ponds, especially Forge Pond. Town history notes sites at Forge Pond outlet, east of Boutwell Brook, west of Providence Hill and around Frances Hill.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Some seasonal fish runs in Stony Brook. Freshwater fishing in ponds. Potential for limited agriculture as well as upland hunting/gathering.

D. Observations:

Combination of numerous ponds plus proximity to Merrimack makes this a likely area for period sites, especially Nipmuck-related (inland, freshwater people).

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails remain as highways linking town centers of Chelmsford, Groton and Dunstable during mid-17th century. Primary routes follow Stony Brook valley along Forge-Coldspring-Plain Roads and Concord-Old Lowell Roads along Nashoba valley.

B. Population:

Small colonial population--less than a dozen families from Chelmsford by end of period. Some residual native inhabitants.

C. Settlement:

Scattered farms during 1660s in area between Stony and Pond Brooks. Solomon Keyes' garrison house, 1664, on Frances Hill.

D. Economic Base:

Native fish weir at Forge Pond outlet. Subsistence agriculture and grazing cattle. Some lumbering. Thomas Hinchman's sawmill, 1669, on Sawmill Meadow Brook, outlet to Nabnasset Pond.

E. Observations:

Outlying section of Chelmsford, while available land and resources attracted some settlers, too exposed and remote for any major development.

## VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

### A. Transportation Routes:

Location of Westford town center on Tadmuc Hill (Prospect Hill) by mid-18th century creates radial road pattern to existing highways as Boston-Carlisle-Old Road to south, Main-Pattern and Hildreth Roads to west, Leland-Main Streets to east and Graniteville and Depot Roads to north. Other roads of the period link with neighboring towns as Millstone-Cowdry and Dunstable Roads to northwest with local network around ponds.

### B. Population:

Abandoned during King Philip's War, slow growth until early 18th century. Tax list of 1724 contained 89 names. Steady growth after incorporation. Census of 1765 listed 962 inhabitants in 169 families and 143 houses.

### C. Settlement:

Scattered farms within the Stony Brook-Forge Pond-Heart Pond area, gradually extending into peripheral sections by mid-18th century. First meetinghouse begun 1724, finished after 1730--on Main Street near common. Second meetinghouse built on common, 1762. Cemetery established 1768. A small town center emerged around these. A secondary locus around mills at Forge Village, after 1730.

### D. Economic Base:

Agriculture and grazing, some orchards. Production of naval stores--pitch, tar, and turpentine for export to Salem shipbuilders--an important occupation. Some lumbering as well. Several mills: John Prescott's mill (unspecified) 1680, Forge Pond outlet (Stony Brook); ironworks (utilizing Groton bog ore), 1730, Forge Pond outlet; William Chandler, fulling and grist mills, from 1724, Stony Brook (Brookside area). Some tanneries reported as well as brick making in southern part of town. Taverns: Pollard's, about 1730, in town center; Brick Tavern, 1750 (?), Groton Road.

### E. Architecture

#### Residential:

Although little has been recorded, it is probable that local examples of the period consisted mostly of two-story central chimney houses with few decorative details except for occasional Georgian style entries. Based on houses built in neighboring towns, and on several extant examples, it is likely that central chimney Cape Cod cottages were a popular local house type. There is no evidence of any high-style of the period.

### F. Observations:

Development restricted during early part of period by frontier instability. After 1725, steady growth into a diversified and prosperous upland community.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Colonial highways remain in place with improvement of east/west link between Merrimack and Nashua valleys as the Groton Road (Route 40) and Chelmsford-Littleton Roads (Route 110) by early 19th century.

B. Population:

Slow growth occurred until 1820, after which there was a brief small decline. No foreign-born population known. Universalist Society present 1826; Union Congregational Society, formed 1828.

C. Settlement Location:

Village formed at Westford Center; Forge Village enlarged.

D. Economic Base:

Continued activity of forge and fulling mill at Forge Pond. No new manufacturing until arrival of Stony Brook Railroad in Early Industrial Period. First quarrying of granite 1826-27, at Graniteville, though granite had been taken previously to that date from the large surface boulders scattered over north part of town.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Vernacular types of the preceding period continued to be built until c. 1810-20. Federalist style central chimney cottages built in scattered locations. Most common house types built after c. 1810-20 were rear-wall chimney and twin-chimney houses with symmetrical center-entrance facade. High-style houses were built at Forge Village and at Westford Center after c. 1790; most high-style examples were of mixed brick and wood construction with end-wall chimneys and transitional late Georgian/ Federalist decorative details, such as pilasters on panelled bases. At least one three-story Federalist style house was built at Westford Center.

Institutional:

Late Georgian style meetinghouse built at town center for First Parish, 1794; late Federal/Greek Revival style meetinghouse built for Union Congregational Society, 1829. 5 school districts established, 1787, and school houses built in each district; 1806, sixth school district established in southeast section of town; 1822, school districts subdivided to create 8 districts, increased to 9 in 1826; all districts presumably had one-story, one-room school houses. Westford Academy incorporated 1792, two-story late Georgian style Academy Hall built c. 1793 at town center. Town poor farm established 1824.

Commercial:

Limited development consisting of one store and one hotel at Forge Village (1828), 5 or 6 taverns throughout the town and possibly one or two

stores at Westford Center; secondary sources do not record whether these activities were conducted in converted houses or in buildings constructed for commercial use alone.

Industrial:

Probable industrial building types were one- and two-story wood-frame shop buildings and waterpower mills at Forge Village.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highways remain from early 19th century with railroad link between Merrimack and Nashua Rivers along Stony Brook (1848); depots at Brookside, Westford, Graniteville and Forge Village by mid-19th century. Secondary lines from Concord-Acton to north follow along Butter Brook at Carlisle Station (1871) and along Nashoba and Reed Brooks to junction at Graniteville (1873), now abandoned.

B. Population:

Gradual growth occurred throughout the period; larger increases between 1850 and 1860 probably reflected the growth of Graniteville as a result of newly established mills; rapid growth also followed the Civil War (1865-70). Foreign-born population (11-12% of total population) was made up primarily of Irish immigrants. Methodists present c. 1856, Methodist Society formed, 1869-70.

C. Settlement Location:

Westford Center became increasingly a wealthy residential center; Forge Village expanded as a mill village; Graniteville became a mill village after c. 1854.

D. Economic Base:

Opening of railroad line from Lowell and Chelmsford through Forge Village, Graniteville and Brookside in 1848 brought new industrial activity to all three Stony Brook villages. Earliest was Charles Sargent, who came to Graniteville from Lowell in 1854. These textile machine shops supplied much of the equipment for mills in the Merrimack valley and beyond. Abbot Worsted established 1855 at Graniteville and to Forge Village in 1879. Said to have been the first in the nation to use camel hair for worsted yarns. Moore woolen yarn mill established at Brookside, 1862. Forge Village Horse-Nail Co. succeeds to buildings of the Forge Village iron works, which had closed in 1865.

E. Architecture

Residential:

A range of house types present, mostly Greek Revival and Italianate styles. Workers' housing at Graniteville and Forge Village consisted mostly of double cottages and a smaller number of double houses and side-hall plan

cottages and houses. Ambitious and high-style houses of the period were located mainly at Westford Center where Italianate villas (c. 1865) and center-entrance twin chimney Greek Revival style houses (c. 1840-50) were built along Main Street and simpler side-hall plan houses and cottages were built on Boston Road and Plain Street north of the town center. A small cluster of Second Empire style houses (2 or 3) was built on Prescott Street at Graniteville by individual mill owners and businessmen.

#### Institutional:

High Victorian Gothic style church (Methodist) built at Graniteville, 1869-70. Ten school districts and school houses in operation after 1851; district system abolished 1869 and school houses rebuilt after 1869. Late Federal style, brick almshouse/poor farm built 1832 or 1837 (conflicting dates in secondary sources).

#### Commercial:

Little information recorded; it is likely that several one-story or two-story wood-frame buildings were built for use as stores at Forge Village, Graniteville and Westford Center during the period. Railroad stations were built in several of the town's villages after 1848.

#### Industrial:

Two-story Italianate style granite mill buildings with ornamented stair-towers built at Graniteville after 1854 throughout the remainder of the period. Brick mills built at Forge Village (?).

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

#### A. Transportation Routes:

Rail and road systems remain from mid-19th century. Trolley lines extended from Chelmsford through Westford to Ayer by early 1900s with route between Whidden Corner and Graniteville along private roadbed to Forge Village along Prescott Street and local route to town center along Main Street from North Chelmsford.

#### B. Population:

Steady growth throughout period, except for small decline between 1900 and 1905. Most of population increase came from the increase in the number of foreign-born residents who accounted for 40% of the total population in 1915; during most of the period the largest immigrant group was French Canadian. No new religious societies recorded in secondary sources.

#### C. Settlement Location:

Major part of growth occurred in Graniteville and Forge Village; Westford Center continued to grow as a wealthy residential district; some development of cottages may have occurred around Nabnasset Pond.

D. Economic Base:

Abbot Worsted Mills expanded into Forge Village. No further industrial development. Worsted yarn the principal manufactured product of town; value of product from the Moore and Abbot mills in 1875, \$278,000.

E. Architecture:

Residential:

Workers' housing of the period at Graniteville and Forge Village included several building types and styles; the earliest (1870s-1880s) were side-hall and central chimney Italianate style cottages, as well as a small number of Italianate style row-houses and double houses. Somewhat later (1890s-1910) and perhaps privately built were a moderate number of side-hall houses with simple Queen Anne style details. No high-style housing seems to have been built in either village. New construction at Westford Center included several high-style examples of late Italianate (1870s), Queen Anne/Tudor (c. 1890-1905) and Colonial Revival (c. 1900-1910) styles, as well as simpler examples at the village's periphery. In general, the Second Empire and Victorian Gothic styles were absent.

Institutional:

Union Congregational Church remodelled in Queen Anne style, 1890s. Schools gradually centralized; multiple-room Queen Anne style school houses built at Graniteville (1884) and Westford Center (1897) and at Forge Village (1870s, remodelled 1890s). Italianate style town hall built 1870-71, enlarged 1880. Classical Revival style library built 1895-1896.

Commercial:

Same trends as in preceding period, no commercial districts, except for minor neighborhood centers at each village.

Industrial:

Continued construction of granite mill buildings at Graniteville until c. 1880. Two- and three-story brick mills constructed at Forge Village, 1887, and enlarged until c. 1910. Brookside brick worsted mill rebuilt, 1895.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Streetcar and secondary railroad lines abandoned in 1920s with improvement of local highways as autoroads, including Groton Road as Route 40, Concord Road as Route 225 and Acton Road as Route 110. Local roads to town center also upgraded during 1930s.

B. Population:

Rapid growth between 1915 and 1925, followed by slower growth. No information on foreign-born population; no new religious societies recorded in secondary sources; Catholic parish formed by 1935 (cornerstone of Prescott Street church).



C. Settlement Location:

Same as in preceding period, with more rapid development around Nabnasset Pond (1920s).

D. Economic Base:

No new industrial development identified. Moore Worsted mill sold to Abbot interests in 1920.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Workers' housing at Graniteville and Forge Village consisted of Colonial Revival style double houses and some four family row houses (c. 1915-25). Bungalows and some rustic cabins were built in lakeside locations. Little high-style seems to have been built, with the exception of a small number of Colonial Revival style houses at Westford Center.

Institutional:

Late Gothic Revival style Catholic Church built 1934 on Prescott Street. Colonial Revival style school house built at Nabnasset, 1922; Colonial Revival style firehouses built (1930s?) at Forge Village and Graniteville.

Commercial:

No significant development.

Industrial:

No significant development.

XI. SOURCES

Hodgman, Edwin, History of the Town of Westford, 1883.  
Kennedy, June W., Westford Recollections, 1729-1979, 1979.  
Westford 250th Anniversary Committee, Westford...250 Years, 1979.