

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

WESTMINSTER

Report Date: 1984

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: 1984

COMMUNITY: Westminster

I. TOPOGRAPHY

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Six-mile-square Narragansett Township Number Two granted to war veterans in 1728. Established as district of Westminster in 1759. Incorporated as a town in 1770. Part included in new town of Gardner, 1785. Parts of Fitchburg annexed 1796, 1815. Part annexed to Ashburnham, 1824. Part of unincorporated "No Town" annexed in 1834. Part annexed to Princeton, 1870.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Suburban hill town on historic east-west corridors north of Wachusett Mountain, with native site potential at Meetinghouse Pond, Wachusett Lake, and other local ponds. First permanent European settlement in 1737, with meetinghouse site established by 1739. Garrisoned outpost during 1740s French and Indian War, with general settlement delayed until 1750s. Late 18th century agricultural development is dispersed, with small-scale textile and iron manufacturing in the east. After 1800, central focus shifts from hilltop meetinghouse center to linear, commercial, turnpike village, where most civic and religious functions relocate by 1840. Several small-scale chair manufacturing centers develop by mid 19th century, and paper manufacturing is established at Wachusett Village. Post-1920 residential development concentrates on attractive lakeside sites near the Route 2 corridor between Fitchburg and Gardner. Suburban development has persisted to the present and is likely to continue, as the improved Route 2 corridor attracts further industrial development, and more intensive exurban growth is established on southern sites with Wachusett Mountain views. The most significant relic agricultural landscapes remain in the northeast, although many notable dispersed farmhouses have also survived throughout town. Mid-19th century Westminster Center remains largely intact, and a small worker housing cluster survives at Wachusett Village.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes

Highland tributary area north of Wachusett Mountain, with Whitman River corridor in north. East-west trail north of Wachusett Mountain inferred on Worcester Road north of Wachusett Lake-Bolton Road to West Princeton Road-abandoned way to Harrington Road-Minott Road south of Cedar Swamp-Newton Road. North loop to Meetinghouse Pond inferred on Cross Road-Knowler Road-Carter Street-Dawley Street-Worcester Road. East branch on Leominster Street, with southern connector on East Road. Northwest Whitman

River corridor trail inferred along South Ashburnham Road from Westminster Hill Road, with southwest connector on Batherick Road-Howard Road. Northwest trail from Meetinghouse Pond to Crystal Lake inferred on West Main Street-Beechy Hill Road-Sargent Street-West Main Street.

B. Settlement Pattern

Like most northern Worcester County towns, no archaeological sites are reported. This area is located near Mt. Wachusett and the territory of the Nashua subgroup of Nipmucks who visited there seasonally. The upland area was visited for short periods, with occupations likely along the many ponds, including Crocker, Round Meadow, Meetinghouse, Partridge, Noyes, Wyman, and Wachusett, as well as the Whitman River banks.

C. Subsistence Pattern

This area was visited seasonally from base camps in Sterling and Lancaster to the southeast, by small family and task groups, primarily for hunting and fishing.

V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes

Established native trails continue in use.

B. Settlement Pattern

A continuation of patterns established during the Contact period.

C. Subsistence Pattern

A continuation of patterns established during the Contact period.

D. Economic Base

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes

Improved pre-settlement trails include Sunderland (?) Road across southern part of town as important east-west route north of Wachusett Mountain (Worcester Road-Bolton Road-abandoned way to Harrington Road-Minott Road-Newton Road). "Four Rod Road" (Main Street-State Colony Road) projected northwest from meetinghouse site in first proprietors' lots survey of 1730s. Mid-18th century roads improved from meetinghouse center to outlying farms and surrounding towns. Main through routes include road east to Lunenburg (East Main Street-Old Turnpike Road), Winchendon-Lunenburg road in north (Dean Hill Road), and Lancaster-Athol road through center (Worcester Road-Main Street-Dawley Road-Carter Street-Ellis Road).

B. Population

The proprietors of the town came from the following eastern towns: Charlestown (33), Watertown (26), Cambridge (17), Sudbury (11), Reading (10), and others in lesser numbers. The earliest settlers to the town of ca. 120 came from Watertown (19), Sudbury and Cambridge (10 each), Concord and Lexington (9 each), Framingham and Newton (6 each), Acton and Lancaster (5 each), and 20 other towns. In 1737, the first settled families had 15 members. By the end of 1741, 19 had received bounties to settle in the town. When the town was visited in 1750 to determine whether the grant was fulfilled, 32 had fulfilled the grant with a house and three cleared acres, and an additional 22 were well on their way to adherence within a year; seven more were still housed in "little houses," some with no cellars, suggesting an impermanent phase. Thirty men signed the petition for incorporation in 1759, when there were 80 polls and ca. 300 inhabitants. In 1765 the total equalled 468, and had nearly tripled to 1,145 in 1776. The town's first minister was ordained in 1742 and the relationship was fraught with difficulties over both salary and doctrine, resulting in his dismissal in 1765, probably as an Arminian.

C. Settlement Pattern

The area now Westminster was designated as Narragansett #2, a six-mile-square bounty to heirs of soldiers in King Philip's War in 1728; it was surveyed and designated to the specific proprietors in 1732, when a 500-acre farm for Gov. Belcher was added to the town. The initial land division consisted of 60-acre lots, arranged with 60-rod fronts along a street 4 rods wide running northwest to southeast for one mile. The six-acre meetinghouse, training, and burying ground lot was located southeast of the geographic center. In spite of bounty offers, no settlers came to the town until 1737. By 1743 a second division of 60 acres was distributed, and ten houses were fortified due to frontier warfare, including one on Mt. Pleasant, one near the old common, one near Meetinghouse Pond, and seven others. Later divisions of the town land now in Gardner took place in 1755 and 1767.

D. Economic Base

Westminster is not classified by Pruitt, but probably shared its neighbors' characteristics as a poor agrarian town. This would indicate low prosperity, commercial development and community wealth, predictable for a new town. Attempts were made early to establish a sawmill near Wachusettville, contracting William Brattle of Cambridge as early as 1736. A sawmill was established at the outlet of Meetinghouse Pond as early as 1741, and by the 1760s three others were located in the town. During that same time, tanning and brickmaking were conducted in the town.

E. Architecture

Residential: Several mid- and third-quarter 18th century dwellings in inventory. All are center chimney plans with equal numbers of one- and two-story survivals. One particularly nice house, which may be early Federal period and which was not inventoried, is a two-story, five-bay, center chimney plan with quoins on the front only and a handsome pedimented door (Bragg Hill Road).

Institutional: First meetinghouse (35x45 feet) built, 1739. Schoolhouse (20 feet square) built at center in 1766. By 1772, four additional school buildings (18 feet square) were erected.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes

Colonial roads continue in use, with the addition of the Fifth Massachusetts Turnpike (ca. 1800), through the middle of town, passing north of the hilltop meetinghouse center (West Main Street-Main Street-Turnpike Road), after some local controversy of the route location.

B. Population

The town's rate of growth slowed from its earlier pace, though growth remained at ca. 50%, from 1,145 in 1776 to 1,696 in 1830. Within the first parish, the shift within the town toward Arminianism and Unitarianism continued; in 1820 the town ceased to support a minister and the more Calvinist in the town formed an independent Congregational society and church. Townspeople attended Baptist services at the Ashby-Fitchburg church until establishing their own on Meetinghouse Pond in 1827. Methodists attended in Ashburnham until forming a society here in 1815, and building a church in the north in 1817. Universalism drew largely from the Congregational Society, ca. 75 members, when they built a church on the north common in 1820; they had attended in Dana before organizing a society in 1817. Residents in the northeast, frame from the meetinghouse, had attempted to support "the Lord's Barn" with the neighboring towns in 1789. The town took a moderate position during Shays Rebellion, recommending release of the insurgents who might then rejoin society and order; they were against the court system. A social library was formed early in the period.

Discussion of a poor farm began as early as 1803, and one was purchased in 1830. The required north and south militias were supplemented by a Rifle Company (1816) and a regional cavalry (1829).

C. Settlement Pattern

In 1788, the second meetinghouse was built on Meetinghouse Hill, which remained the primary civic focus. Several high-style residences are also built in the immediate area. However, the main center of growth after 1800 is the turnpike commercial village which develops along Main Street northwest of and downslope from the meetinghouse. The academy (1829) is located on the intermediate hillslope between the civic and commercial foci. Outside this center area, dispersed agricultural settlement continues, and small-scale textile manufacturing is initiated in the east along Leominster Road (later Wachusett Village area). Alternative religious foci are dispersed, with the Methodist church (1817) in the extreme northwest near the Ashburnham line (Ashburnham Road/Needham Road), the first Universalist Church (1820) 1 1/2 miles northeast of the center on North Common Road, and the brick Baptist meetinghouse (1829) southeast of the center on the northeast shore of Meetinghouse Pond.

D. Economic Base

A large proportion of the town's land was unimproved or woodlot in 1784, 78.9%, with an additional 3.3% classified as unimprovable. Moderate proportions of the remaining farmed land was in pasturage, 9.4%, mowing and mowing land, 6.5%, and 1.9% under tillage.

E. Architecture

Residential: One- and two-story center chimney houses remain popular. Two-story, double chimney, several of brick with hipped roofs, and rearwall chimney houses, most of which have hipped roofs, also appear with significant frequency. One unusual building (1801) is a two-story, five-bay, hipped roof house with double-pile plan. The end walls are frame and the front (and presumably rear) walls are brick. The chimneys are located in the brick walls between the windows. Also recorded are at least three Federal brick or brick and frame houses which appear to be double-pile with end chimneys, but only one set of chimneys which are well forward of the ridge. One two-story, frame, interior end chimney house is also recorded.

Institutional: Second meetinghouse (1788) measured 45x60 feet and had pedimented door centered on long facade. Belfry added, 1807. Universalist meetinghouse built at North Common 1 1/2 miles northeast of center (gone) in 1820. A Methodist meetinghouse (gone) was erected in the northern part of town near the Ashburnham line ca. 1817 and was described (Heywood) as a whitewashed building. A brick Baptist church was built near the northeast shore of Westminster Pond in 1829.

By 1779, there were six school districts, each with a building. The number increased to nine in 1821 when district #9 erected a brick schoolhouse. In 1829 a two-story academy was built on the west slope of the meetinghouse hill.

Commercial: A two-story, eight-bay building with two interior chimneys and two pedimented doorways is likely to have functioned as a tavern. The building appears to be fourth-quarter of the 18th century, although a portion is said to date from 1752. One section has a leanto and the other end a beverly jog.

The two-story brick store on Main Street dates from 1829.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes

A new road to Fitchburg was built from the Center Village in 1835. The Vermont and Massachusetts is built along the Whitman River corridor in the north part of town in 1848, with a depot in the east.

B. Population

The town's population fluctuated during the period, increasing from 1,696 in 1830 to 1,979 in 1855, and decreasing thereafter to 1,770 in 1870. Although it did not dominate the town, manufacturing increased by nearly three times just between 1820 and 1840, and by four between 1820 and 1875. Agriculture expanded also, particularly in the early years like so many other towns. During this period, the foreign-born were highest proportionally in 1855, when 9.3% of the population came from Ireland, Canada, and England. Ten years later, the total had dropped to 6.5%, with fewer Irish and Canadians.

Although the Methodists disbanded early (1832) in the period for Ashburnham, the Congregational church experienced a rise of perfectionist beliefs. Come converts to the Millerite movement temporarily left the town to await the end of the world, but returned after 1842. Several reform and self-improvement organizations were formed in the town, including a Temperance Society (1829), Lyceum (1832), Young People's Literary Society and Farmers' Library (1853), and an Academy flourished during the period. Many types of Abolitionism had adherents in the town, and in 1835 an Anti-Slavery Society was formed. A Farmers' Club and Cooperative Union were formed in 1850. The Westminster Guards were formed in 1843.

C. Settlement Pattern

In the 1830s, civic activities relocated to the commercial, chair-manufacturing village northwest of the original meetinghouse center. Secondary manufacturing centers develop in the east at Wachusett Village, in the north at Whitmanville and in the south at Steam Valley. Dispersed shops and mills continue in operation, especially along Whitman River and the Round Meadow Pond tributary.

Center village development includes relocation of the Universalist church (1835) to Main Street, the building of the third Congregational church (1835) at the Fitchburg Road/Main Street intersection, and the construction of the town hall (1839) on

Bacon Street. The Baptist Church eventually relocated to Main Street in 1863. Residential development extends northeast on Bacon Street, with some building on Pleasant Street, and northwest on Main Street beyond the chair manufacturing focus at Ellis Road to the Main Street/Turnpike Road intersection.

Chair and paper manufacturing developed at the former textile focus at Wachusett Village, with linear cottage development along the south side of Leominster Road. Chair manufacturing centers also developed at Whitmanville (South Ashburnham Road/North Common Road) and at Steam Valley (Spruce Street).

D. Economic Base

E. Architecture

Residential: Majority of surviving buildings appear to be from Greek Revival period and are gable end, side-passage plan or center entry houses. A greater number seem to be of one story. Small numbers of single-story center and double chimney houses and two-story double chimney houses occur. Later period houses, primarily Italianate in detail, are also gable-end, side-passage plans. The five-bay, center entry houses are practically nonexistent for the latter portion of the period. One one-and-a-half-story, brick example is recorded. Symmetrical two-story, three-bay, Italianate houses as well as asymmetrical houses occur in limited numbers. A one-and-a-half story, three-bay, center entry, double gable-end house is recorded.

Institutional: In 1835, the Universalist church locates in the center. The building, no longer a church, is a gable-end Greek Revival structure with a Doric portico and two door with a central window between them raised so that the top of the window butts the frieze. The third meetinghouse was built in the center in 1837 and was a three-bay, gable-end Greek Revival building with a Doric portico. In 1863, the Baptists located in the center in a building that looks almost like the Universalist church. The tower and spire were added in 1872.

The three-bay, pilastered town hall with center entry was built in 1839.

Commercial: The two-story, six-bay, low-pitched gable roofed frame building on Main Street in the center is now the office of Westminster Crackers. Originally, the 1840s structure functioned as the institution's first bakery.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes

By ca. 1900, east-west electric streetcar service is established through Westminster Center from Fitchburg to Gardner (Fitchburg Road-Main Street-Westminster Street).

B. Population

The population of the town dropped during this period from 1,770 in 1870 to 1,353 in 1910, with recoveries in 1890 to 1,688, and to 1915 to 1,594. Agriculture remained the primary employment of the town. The proportion of the foreign-born in the town increased, from 6.7% in 1875 to 18.9% in 1915. Within this small group the Irish remained the most numerous throughout the 19th century, until outnumbered by French Canadians and Nova Scotians; later, Finns and Swedes came to the town in small numbers.

There is no information on changes within the town's Congregational, Baptist, and Universalist churches. The earlier subscription libraries were given to the town in 1868, and reorganized in 1877. The Academy was purchased by the town for a public high school in 1871. The Cooperative Union was followed by the similar Sovereigns of Industry. Temperance advocates formed the Good Templars.

C. Settlement Pattern

Relatively little development occurred, with some residential expansion in the Center, and the removal of the Wachusett Village industrial complex. In the Center, infill occurs on the north side of Main Street north of Hubbardston Road and south on South Westminster Road/Miles Street. With the establishment of Wyman Reservoir serving Fitchburg, the paper mills and chair shop at Wachusett Village was removed, although the housing remained. Some new residential development occurred southwest of Meetinghouse Pond, and on the west side of Wachusett Lake ("Wachusett Park").

D. Economic Base

E. Architecture

Residential: Little apparent building activity. Gable-end, side-passage plan houses, primarily late 19th century with late Italianate and Queen Anne trim, are recorded. Most appear to be of one story.

Institutional: Our Savior Lutheran church is a one-story, gable-end, frame building with a central projecting entry tower which appears to date from ca. 1900-1910. The 1829 Academy building was acquired by the town in 1872 for use as the high school. The building burned in 1888, and in 1912 a brick, Colonial Revival school building replaced it.

The town hall was raised to two stories in 1885.

The Forbush Library (1901) is a one-story, three-bay Colonial Revival building of pressed brick and Indiana limestone trim, designed by Frost, Briggs and Chamberlain.

The small, square, brick pumping station on the north end of Wachusett Lake dates from this period.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes

by the early 1920s, the east-west Mohawk Trail automobile corridor was established through Westminster Center and Westminster Depot (old Route 7, later Route 2) on Westminster Street-Main Street-Fitchburg Road. By 1930, Worcester Road southeast from the Center east of Wachusett Mountain is improved as part of Route 64 (later Route 140). By the mid-1930s, a north-south route to Fitchburg was established through the east part of town as part of Route 120 (later Route 31).

B. Population

The town's population grew overall during the period, from 1,594 in 1915, dropping to 1,345 by 1920, and recovering rapidly to reach 2,126 by 1940. The foreign-born population expanded from 18.9% in 1915 to 24.9% in 1940. The Finns were particularly numerous, forming and organizing a cooperative after World War I. The rural population remained high, 39.8% in 1940.

C. Settlement Pattern

Lakeside cottages form the main type of period development, in the southeast around Wyman Pond (Baker's Grove, Lakewood Park, Leino Park), and southwest of the Center at Partridge Pond. Some Route 2 corridor development occurs in the far west, and east of the Center.

D. Economic Base

E. Architecture

Residential: Little development apparent beyond scattered examples of Colonial Revival, bungalows, and Four Square plan houses. One 1940s brick, Tudor Revival observed.

Institutional: 1837 Congregational church burns in 1942 and is rebuilt to replicate the Greek Revival meetinghouse, being a gable end structure with a recessed entry and four Doric columns in antis. St. Edward the Confessor Roman Catholic Church (1952) is located in the Center. The building, designed by T. Cranston Albro of Greenfield, is a brick "Colonial" church.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

Inventory seems to be fairly comprehensive. Sites are marked on U.S.G.S. map. Good covered of Colonial through mid-19th century and most public buildings for all periods. Some survey forms without photographs.