

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

LEXINGTON

Report Date: 1980

Associated Regional Report: Boston Area

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

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

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

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

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: September, 1980

COMMUNITY: Lexington

I. TOPOGRAPHY:

Town occupies approximately 20 square miles on the divide between the watersheds of the Merrimack River (via the Shawsheen River) and the Boston Basin (via the Charles and Mystic Rivers). Lexington lies almost entirely within the Fells Upland district, an elevated area of peat swamps dotted with hilly ground moraines of between 250 and 350 feet elevation. The peat swamps themselves were harvested both for fuel and humus at various periods and when drained the same areas provided excellent agricultural and grazing land. Of the slow flowing streams, most of which originated within the town, none offered any substantial waterpower. The town has no large natural lakes, but both Arlington and Cambridge have built reservoirs which lie partly in Lexington. In the north corner of the town, a band of Andover granite was worked for a short while in the late 19th century, as was a local deposit of iron oxide, called a "paint mine".

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES:

Originally within Cambridge as "Cambridge Farms"; surviving 1636 Eight Mile Line boundaries to north (Woburn-Burlington) and south (Waltham). Established as North Parish of Cambridge in 1691 and became separate town of Lexington in 1712 with boundary at Arlington line. Lincoln and Bedford portions removed on west in 1754.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW:

Important historic town on western suburban axis of Boston. Located on intermediate highland between Mystic, Concord and Charles rivers with native sites suspected at trail focus at town center. Early settlement from Cambridge along Vine Brook by mid 17th century with mill site at East Lexington. Formation of town center by late 17th century with some surviving Late First Period houses. Nationally significant as battle site of Revolution with preservation of Colonial Federal landscape along Battle Road (Massachusetts Ave). Town remained modest farming community with craft village at E. Lexington from early 19th century, including advanced Greek Revival examples. Town center gradually absorbed into Boston suburban fabric during 19th century, although few notable period structures remain. Exceptions are original railroad depot and Victorian churches. Suburban expansion continued through mid-20th century along main auto routes from Boston. Residential and commercial building in period revival styles. Development of former farmland has left little evidence of 19th century agriculture, save on isolated backroads such as Allen or Vine Sts with barns and greenhouses. Town center consciously historic with brick revival blocks, while peripheral areas suffer from intense industrial and commercial pressure along Route 128 axis around Hanscom Airport.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620):

A. Transportation:

Intermediate highland area with focus of regional trails connecting Charles, Mystic, Shawsheen and Concord drainages around Vine Brook, Lexington Center. Primary documentation trail from Watertown to Bedford along Blossom-Allen-Steadman-Waltham-Hancock-N.Hancock-Valley Sts and along axis of Bedford St to Westview Cemetery (Pine St). Branch trail to Concord apparently follows from Blossom St as Old Shade -

Shade Sts to Lincoln and Weston Sts. Probable trail from Cambridge to Concord follows Massachusetts Ave-Lincoln St with branch to Woburn as Vine-Woburn Sts. Alternate route from Arlington to Billerica appears to follow Lowell St with former loop at Laconia-Ridge Rds (esker still intact). Other conjunctured trails appear as Grove-Burlington to Billerica and possibly Watertown-Pleasant-Walnut Sts to Watertown. (Calendar History, 1947:44-46)

B. Settlement Pattern:

No period sites reported. One Woodland site reported north of Loring Hill. Other small upland sites are possible along Vine, Munroe, Beaver, and Kiln Brooks.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Probably used as an upland hunting and gathering area. May also have been good source for fur-bearing mammals.

D. Observations:

Apparently little native occupation, rather an upland buffer area between groups in the Arlington/Mystic river focus and those further west along the Shawsheen and Concord.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675):

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails adopted as highways with Watertown-Bedford route over Vine Brook as primary North-south axis. East-west route from Cambridge to Concord improved as Massachusetts Ave-Lincoln St with radial to Woburn as Vine-Woburn Sts by mid-17th century.

B. POPULATION:

Small, less than a dozen families, primarily from West Cambridge (now Arlington).

C. Settlement Pattern:

Several large farms established along Vine Brook by mid 17th century, particularly Herlarkeden-Pelham Farm (1636) at town center and Steadman, Bridge and Stone farms along Watertown and Concord paths in SW section. Winship grist mill at Bow St-E. Lexington by 1650 on Mill Brook.

D. Economic Base:

Agriculture and grazing by settlers from West Cambridge. Earliest sawmill established by Edward Winship by 1650 at East Lexington.

E. Architecture:

None Extant.

F. Observations:

An outlying agricultural district of Cambridge.

IV. COLONIAL PERIOD (1676-1776):

A. Transportation Routes:

Establishment of town center at Vine Brook (1692) reorients highway system from Watertown-Bedford (N-S) to Cambridge-Concord (E-W). Improvement of Massachusetts Ave over Vine Brook causeway and Concord Hill in late 17th century. Radial roads from meeting house center include Lincoln, Adams, Grove, Hancock, Woburn, Waltham Sts and secondary cross highways as Marrett-Spring Sts and Revere-Hill Sts by early 18th century.

After 1725 radial road pattern remains focused at town center with primary axis along Massachusetts Ave from Cambridge-Concord.

B. Population:

Steady population growth, reaching 700 by 1730s. According to Hudson, it remains in the 700s until the close of the century (Hudson, 1913, p.477). The state census (1765) puts the figure in the 900s.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Emergence of North Cambridge Parish as grazing and farming area by late 17th century. Formation of meeting house at Lexington center (1692) focused civic development along Massachusetts Ave axis with several taverns. Clay pits established along Kiln Brook (Bedford St) by 1680s.

After 1725,
Lexington meeting house remains civic and economic focus with emergence of street village around town center along Massachusetts Ave and outlying farmsteads along radial highways.

D. Economic Base:

Primarily agricultural and grazing. Extensive peat swamps were harvested for local fuel consumption. Oak along the edge of the Great Meadow in East Lexington was sent to Medford shipyards. Clock making in Lexington was introduced about 1751 by a Bradford clockmaker, Nathaniel Mulliken.

E. Architecture:

Residential:

Lexington has comparatively few houses dating before 1776. Woodcuts of two 17th century Lexington houses show two story, 5x1 bay structures with simple paneled or pilastered center chimneys. A few simple vernacular center chimney, two story houses, probably dating from the second quarter of the 18th century, remain, such as the Hancock-Clarke House, as do several 1½ story cottages of the same period. The gambrel roof is known in only one or two instances, hip roofs being the more common form when a departure was made from the standard gable.

Institutional:

The Cambridge Farms Parish (Lexington) was established in 1691; presumably a meeting house was built then. By 1712, though, the "Farmers" had voted to build a new one. In 1761, a new school house was built, replacing an earlier structure located on the

Common, built c.1714. A belfry tower, built c. 1761 on Belfry Hill, later stood on the Common.

Commercial:

The only remaining commercial buildings are the Munroe Tavern (c. 1695) and the Buckman Tavern (1713). Both are among the few examples of Lexington architecture exhibiting Georgian detailing.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1776-1830):

A. Transportation Routes:

Radial highways remain from town center. Turnpikes from Cambridge-Boston in early 19th century improved north-west axis as Concord Turnpike (1806), Middlesex Tpk (Lowell St) and Bedford St from Lexington Common.

B. Population:

Steady increase throughout the period, reaching 1,543 by 1830, probably concentrated in the east village.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Town center remained as civic and commercial focus, but craft industry of furs and clocks emerged around E. Lexington mill site by early 19th century creating street village along Massachusetts Ave. Radial turnpikes from Cambridge stimulated highway taverns along Concord, Lowell and Bedford Sts after 1806.

D. Economic Base:

The substantial growth of oak around the Great Meadow, the presence of peat bogs, and one of the few water power sites in the town gave East Lexington an early boost in the town's manufacturing economy. The dominant manufacturing industry- which employed several hundred local residents at one time or another in East Lexington- was the dressing of furs. At the industry's peak there were four factories turning out fur capes, boas, fur lined overshoes, and the like. The pioneer in this trade was Stephen Robbins; Ambrose Morrell, a Frenchman whose romantic career is chronicled in Smith (below), came to Lexington about 1802, possibly introducing fur coloring to the American trade. It is reported that, at one point, the output of the Lexington furriers exceeded that of any town outside of Boston or New York (Smith, pp.171-172). Most of the furs used in these shops came through Boston from foreign ports.

The construction of the Charles River Bridge in 1786 provided a ready market for dairy products in Boston - an industry which even at that time had already figured significantly in the local town economy. After that date, the trade seems to have grown rapidly. By the beginning of the 19th century, several farmers had regular "routes". As demand grew, "milkmen" - the middlemen between farmer and consumer came into being, probably by the second decade of the 19th century.

Two sawmills, a grist mill, and a spice mill all competed for the limited water-power. A small malt house, a pottery, and a tannery existed to supply local needs. In the years before the arrival of the railroad, boot and shoe production (worth \$11,000 in 1832) provided home employment.

E. Architecture:

Residential:

Within this period, a dominant local architecture form was established: the two story, 5 bay x 1 bay, center hall house with twin interior chimneys, occasionally found on the ridge but normally located on the rear wall. The majority of houses retain this form throughout the period. Entrance detail remains simple but evolves with greater recognition of stylistic change. High style post Colonial and Federal examples are rare as are Federal style houses. The few Federal examples which exist are two story houses with low hip roofs and brick end walls incorporating a single chimney or a pair of chimneys (if paired, the chimneys occupy the corners). Double houses are occasionally encountered, though many of these probably date later, c. 1840. A single example of a double house (c.1820) with linked parapet chimneys forming the party and end walls exists at the extreme northern edge of town on the Bedford Road. Some simple Federal/Greek Revival side hall plan houses, two stories tall with 3 bay facades, began to appear.

Institutional:

In 1784, alms house was constructed just off the Common. Three new schoolhouses (1795) were built as was a new pea green meeting house (1793) with an E-W gable and east end belfry. Four schoolhouses added, 1804; also, 1822, Lexington Academy, later (1839), first state normal school.

Commercial:

Muzzey's Hotel (Monument House) built 1804. Lexington's first brick building, the Brick Store, (1828). A two story building originally constructed with a one story Tuscan portico, the Brick Store also served as a post office after 1836.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Early turnpike and highways systems remained intact. Commuter branch railroad built from Cambridge to Lexington center along Mill Brook (1846). Cross streets around town center by 1850 include Maple and Middle Sts.

B. Population:

Steady rise in population augmented by Irish immigration 1840-55 and 40% jump reaching 2,549 by 1855. Thereafter, a decrease until 1875.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Competition between original town center in Lexington and industrial activity in East Lexington created a nearly continuous street village along Mass. Ave, emphasized by branch railroad along Mill Brook from Cambridge by mid-19th century. Outlying areas emerged as commercial dairy and produce farms along early highways, especially in SW section.

D. Economic Base:

The period is marked by the arrival of the railroad in 1845-46, which had major
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effect on most aspects of economic life. Milk production continued to rise, but with the arrival of the railroad, the importance of the daily milk wagons into Cambridge, Charlestown, and Boston gradually dimmed. Large quantities of milk were sent by rail from Lexington to northern Mass., Vermont, and New Hampshire. By the end of the Civil War, Lexington cows produced over \$59,000 worth of milk.

The trade of Lexington furriers peaked about 1845, with four factories producing \$34,000 worth of fur caps and other products annually. Clock making, introduced about 1751, was revived for a brief period beginning in 1829 when Jonathan Burr erected a factory. His 'improved clocks' brought in \$40,000 in 1832.

The extensive peat swamps provided a ready local fuel for fireplaces and ovens. Cut during the summer, peat was hauled back to homes to dry and store for winter use. With the increasing use of coal and coal stoves after the arrival of the railroad, local usage decreased. In the 1860s, however, the American Peat Company was formed to market the material as a cheap substitute for coal. The company produced about 5 cords of peat briquettes a day from the Great Meadow, but the high cost of handling (including an industrial railway and briquette-making equipment) forced the operation to close after only two years.

E. Architecture:

Residential:

Most two story houses continued to reflect the earlier predominance of the 5 bay x 1 bay, center entrance, twin rear wall chimney, form. A group of East Lexington houses exhibiting this form are noteworthy for their characteristic Asher Benjamin-derived Greek fret door surrounds. Later in the period, (c.1850) 2 story side-hall plan houses in very simple Greek Revival or Italianate designs appeared, as do modest 4 bay, side-hall double houses, particularly in the more industrialized East Lexington area. High style houses are rare and generally confined to the town center and main routes. In one instance, a tetrastyle Ionic portico was added (1839) to the facade of an earlier (c.1800) Federal house to create a broadly proportioned temple front. One two story brick Greek Revival house, with a (later?) rear portico and granite trim was constructed in 1833 on Mass. Ave. Cross-gabled Italianate villas, a few with towers, and rectilinear, center entrance Italianate houses, some with octagonal cupolas, occur with more frequency than high style Greek Revival houses, however. Only one Gothic Revival cottage is known. The few side-hall mansard cottages date to the end of the period, c. 1860-1870. Scattered farms extant in outlying regions to the north and southwest.

Institutional:

In this period, several high style public buildings designed by a local architect, Isaac Melvin, were constructed including a Greek Revival/Italianate Town Hall (site of Muzzey Junior High School) and the Greek Revival 1st Parish Church (both 1846). The Follen Church is an unusual example of the ecclesiastical use of the octagon form. Several district schoolhouses replaced (1853,1854). The Stone Building (of wood), designed as assembly place/meeting house for East Villagers (1833; Isaac Melvin), a pretentious Greek Revival building with a pedimented portico and an elaborate acanthus-trimmed door surround. An engine house was constructed at the town center (1856).

Commercial:

Muzzey's Hotel (1802) replaced by the "Lexington House" (1847), which later served as Dr. Lewis's Female Seminary (1864; burned 1867). A bank building built (1849)

also, two one story Italianate railroad stations (1846), one at Depot Square in town center and one in East Lexington (burned 1976). Observatory (?) located on Loring Hill.

Industrial:

Primarily confined to quasi-domestic settings; clock manufacture (1832) in Harrington House; wheelwright's shop in Mason's Hill schoolhouse (1838). Several saw and grist mills, probably in simple, frame structures.

IX LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD(1870-1915):

A. Transportation Routes:

Railroad extended to Concord-Bedford (1873). Streetcar routes from Waltham, Arlington and Woburn focused upon town center along Waltham St, Massachusetts Ave, and Woburn St with link to Bedford on Bedford St. and trolley park at town line (Pine Knoll Rd) by early 1900s.

B. Population:

Moderate and occasionally fluctuating growth until 1900-15 period when street railway spurs suburban growth. In 1905 nearly a quarter of the population of 4,530 was foreign born primarily from Ireland (415), Nova Scotia (220), and England (95). In 1915 the population reached 5,538.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Decline of East Lexington as industrial village and reassertion of town center as economic and civic focus by late 19th century. Suburban subdivision near railroad depot. Expansion of trolley routes on main roads to Lexington encouraged speculative tracts along Mass Ave at East Lexington, Bedford St at North Lexington, and Waltham St around Marrett Rd by early 20th century.

D. Economic Base:

The economy was dominated by milk production which, at over 500,000 gallons in 1875, was second in the state only to Worcester. By the 1880s the only manufacturing establishment in the town was Matthew Merriam's factory for making leather findings, re-located to the center village from Charlestown in 1882. The discovery of a yellow ochre deposit near the present Estabrook School led in 1870 to the formation of the short-lived Boston and Lexington Paint Co., whose "paint mine" is now town conservation land. Simultaneously, a granite ledge was being worked near the Bedford line.

A late entry in the roles of gasworks in the state, was that of the Lexington Gas Light Co., established in 1874. It was one of only about six in the state which produced illuminating gas from crude petroleum, by what was called the "Henlow Process". Oil gas produced a light of great brilliancy (30 candlepower as opposed to about 18 candlepower for coal gas), but the company went through considerable financial difficulties in its initial years. In 1893, the company was authorized to supply electricity to the town, and in 1909, it was acquired by the Electric Illuminating Co. of Boston.

Lexington, supplied initially with a private waterworks (1881), joined the Metropolitan District in 1903. Telephone service was initiated in 1894. Unique at

this time was the use of a common battery to supply electric current via a central exchange.

E. Architecture:

Residential:

Very little building until after the turn of the century. Very modest two story sidehall Stick Style and Queen Anne houses located in scattered groups along and immediately behind main routes. One Queen Anne/Shingle Style farmstead extant on Waltham St. Along Arlington border in East Lexington some multiple housing units, including a very few three deckers, constructed mostly after 1905. Increasing suburbanization ca.1900 creates pockets of ambitious, architect-designed highstyle houses in the Queen Anne, Shingle, and Colonial Revival styles, particularly above Mass. Ave. (to the south) and also around the town center. Some conversion of older 18th century houses for summer use (Cary Farm, 1881). At least one Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired house extant on Maple St.

Institutional:

1878, "Massachusetts House" (Centennial Exposition exhibit) re-erected on Common. 1884, markers placed on Mass. Ave. indicating location of British cannon, 1775. Episcopal Church of the Redeemer built (1886), also Queen Anne/Colonial Revival Hancock United Church of Christ (1892). "Minute Man" statue (Henry H. Kitson, sculptor) erected on Common, 1900. Old Town Hall/High School removed; new Colonial Revival High School (Cooper and Bailey) constructed, 1902 (present Muzzey Junior High School). Also, Munroe School, 1904, and Adams School, 1912.

Commercial:

Central Block constructed, 1874, Mass Ave. Several hotels built during period, including Centennial Hotel (1876, dem. 1944) and Russell House (1884). 1912, commercial blocks and telephone building constructed in town center.

Industrial;

Lexington Lumber Company buildings on Bedford Street, include clerestory monitor-roofed shed and brick office, c.1910. High style Renaissance Revival Edison Station (1911).

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Existing roads improved as autohighways in 1920s with state routes 4-95 on Mass Ave by-pass 2A on Marrett-Middle Sts around town center and former 128 on Waltham-Woburn Sts. New express highway Route 2 parallels Concord Turnpike from Cambridge by 1930s, now completely rebuilt as freeway. Circumferential Route 128 built around western edge as superhighway (1950) with original bridge at Lincoln St.

B. Population:

Rapid suburban growth as farms succumbed to residential subdivisions made possible by expanding use of motor cars. Between 1915 and 1940 population expands 2½ times, reaching 13,187 by 1940.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Continued expansion of suburban subdivision along main highways, especially Mass Ave-
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Bedford St. Lexington Center remained primary commercial focus. Opening of Route 2 created real estate subdivision along Concord Ave axis and formation of crossroads commercial centers at Marrett-Waltham Sts, Marrett-Lincoln Sts, and Woburn-Lowell Sts. By Second World War development of retail fringe from town center along Bedford St to N. Lexington. Establishment of Hanscom Airport sets up industrial zone along Kiln Brook and Tophet Swamp with Route 128.

D. Economic Base:

Dairy and agriculture products continued to dominate the town's industrial economy though rising land values and substantial population growth drove many agricultural parcels into subdivisions. A second attempt was made to market peat from the Great Meadow. In 1914, Lexington peat was used in the construction of the Yale Bowl turf because of its property of absorbing considerable moisture. In 1934, after decades of discussion, the town joined the Metropolitan Sewer District.

E. Architecture:

Residential:

Large Colonial Revival and Tudor houses in wealthier neighborhoods behind and above town center. More modest Colonial Revival, Tudor, and Dutch Colonial houses with particularly dense concentrations just north of Arlington border. Considerable number of bungalows in southwestern part of town between Mass Ave and Route 2, some probably dating earlier than 1915. Modest houses by far most common type constructed.

Institutional:

Cary Memorial Library constructed (1928); Post Office (1938).

Commercial:

Strip development along Mass Ave at Arlington border, also at town center, with smaller commercial area at intersection of Marrett Road and Waltham Street. Primarily one story commercial blocks dating from the '20s except at town center, where some two story blocks constructed. Several farms converted to golf clubs (Pine Meadows and Lexington Golf Clubs, 1928).

X. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS:

Inventory is good on pre-1850 structures, especially residential, but should include more 19th century buildings, domestic, institutional and commercial. Well preserved areas of high style Shingle, Queen Anne and Colonial Revival houses stand above Mass Ave just east of the town center: these should be surveyed, as should the early railroad station and other surviving "industrial" structures (Edison station, lumber yard, etc) Survey should include techbuilt subdivision off Rts 4 and 225.

Few industrial structures remaining in town. Only one surveyed, East Lexington Station (MHC #201) since gutted by fire in 1976 and torn down in 1979. Other structures unsurveyed include the former street railway powerhouse (Bedford St) the present Lexington Press building, and the Edison Co Substation, and the large monitor roof mill of the Lexington Lumber Co. Of special concern (NR quality) is the trainshed type Lexington center depot, a rare and unusual survival despite "colonialization" in 1918.

XII. SOURCES

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