

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

MELROSE

Report Date: 1981

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.

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MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

Date: 1981

Community: Melrose

I. TOPOGRAPHY

City occupies 4.8 square miles of the Fells Upland, immediately east of the Middlesex Fells plateau. The commercial center of the city lies in a north-south valley traced by the route of the Boston & Maine, interrupted only by Ell Pond. The highlands in the eastern half of the city have several peaks over 200 feet in height. The city has several small ponds, of which Ell Pond is the principal example. Several of these provided limited waterpower. Most of the city is part of the Mystic watershed and is drained by Spot Pond Brook and the Malden River, though some of the eastern highlands drain into the Saugus River.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Originally part of Charlestown grant with surviving Eight Mile Line of 1636 as Saugus boundary. Became part of Malden town grant of 1649 as North Common divisions with original boundary in part as Stoneham line with later 18th century adjustments. Northern portion annexed to Reading (Wakefield) 1727 at Melrose Highlands. Became independent town with division at Malden line 1850, and incorporated as city in 1899.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Suburban city on northern corridor of metropolitan Boston. Located at headwaters of Malden River with suspected native sites around Ell Pond and reported lithic quarries in vicinity of Mt. Hood. Early axis of English settlement between Malden and Reading with farmsteads along Ell Pond plain by mid-17th century and two apparent late First period houses on Lebanon Street. Area remained modest agricultural district through Colonial period with surviving grid of late 17th century field division on east side (Upham Street). Limited growth through early 19th century along Main Street corridor with taverns and shoe shops. Primary development occurred with Boston railroad connections during mid-19th century around suburban depots on west side at Wyoming and Melrose Highlands, with notable examples of early Greek Revival and Gothic estates around Ell Pond plain. Town center developed on Main Street during Victorian period with representative brick business blocks, including original YMCA of Boston design, and industrial development along railroad corridor with intact complex of Boston Rubber Shoe buildings at Fells. Affluent suburban neighborhood expanded on west side around Melrose Highlands

through early 20th century with variety of period Shingle and Colonial Revival houses, while east side neighborhood is developed along Porter and Upham Streets with similar array of Victorian and Historic styles, including some early examples of New England Revival designs around Bellevue Golf Course. A more modest residential development occurred along Lebanon Street through mid-20th century with two-family and three-decker construction. The Mt. Hood area remained isolated as a recreational preserve with surviving farmsteads around Swains Pond. Pressures of expansion are evident along Main Street corridor to Malden with commercial strip development around Pine Banks and industrial-institutional encroachment around Ell Pond parkland.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Focus of local routes through Boston Basin highlands. Primary N/S trail around Ell Pond appears as Main-Lebanon-Lynde Streets to Boston Rock with alternate loop to west as Vinton Street in part with E/W connector along Franklin-Howard Streets between Aberjona and Saugus drainage around Melrose Highlands. Secondary system of trails apparent around Mt. Hood lithic source area with reported routes along Forest and Swains Pond Avenue and connections across Wyoming Cemetery to Malden River. Other likely candidates include Washington Avenue around Black Rock to Spot Pond (Stoneham).

B. Settlement Pattern:

No documented period sites; however, possible period sites around Ell Pond and on well drained, south facing terraces along Malden river. Other sites possible around Swains, Tower, and Long ponds.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Wintering and ice fishing sites around ponds. Upland hunting and gathering.

D. Observations:

Part of the corridor running from the Malden River north to Ell Pond, Spot Pond (Stoneham) and Crystal Lake (Wakefield). Undoubtedly an area with a large, if seasonal, native population. Another factor of importance was the presence of major lithic quarries northeast of Wyoming Cemetery - source of the light green Melrose felsite. Important quarry and workshop sites probable in Mt. Hood Memorial park area.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails improved by mid-17th century:highways with primary N/S road from Malden to Reading as Main-Lebanon-Lynde Streets around Ell Pond and Boston Rock with E/W connector as Franklin-Howard Streets from Woburn to Saugus.

B. Population:

First settlement by 1650, though population extremely small.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Along primary axis of settlement between Malden and Reading by mid-17th century with Cotymore Farm on north Ell Pond plain during 1650s.

D. Economic Base:

Land primarily used for pasturage and woodlots, with some fishing in Ell Pond for alewives and shad. First sawmill in town erected by Samuel Howard on Ell Pond, 1663.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highways remain from 17th century with Main-Lebanon axis as primary N/S road. Field divisions of 1695 set out E/W grid as Porter, Upham, Grove Streets from Ell Pond plain.

B. Population:

Town remained very sparsely settled. Probably no more than 150-200 people by 1765.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Ell Pond plain continues as primary focus of agricultural settlement with expansion to east along Common divisions of 1695 to Mt. Hood area and on west to Vinton Street highlands. Primary axis of development set along Main Street from Malden to Reading.

D. Economic Base:

Agriculture and fishing for alewives given prominence. Grist mill on Ell Pond by 1713; sawmills on Swains and Long ponds.

E. Architecture:

Residential: At least a few central chimney houses, cottages and half houses still stand in Melrose; these are primarily mid-18th century, vernacular examples, although at least one house, the Upham House, is dated to 1703. Although they are not numerous, Melrose's 18th century houses must be counted as important survivals in a town which did not achieve maturity until the mid-19th century.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Improvements of N/S axis as realigned Main Street across Ell Pond plain 1806 and corner of Newburyport Turnpike at Malden line.

B. Population:

Slow growth until arrival of the railroad. No more than 30-35 houses in Melrose by 1830, with possibly 300-350 people. First religious society not formed until 1813.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Main Street axis continues as development focus along Ell Pond plain with commercial activity at Melrose center.

D. Economic Base:

Agriculture, supplemented by shoemaking, a trade introduced by Jonathan Barrett, c. 1806. Frederick Tudor is reputed to have cut the first ice for commercial purposes at Long Pond. Product was then teamed to Charlestown (Goss, 1902).

E. Architecture:

Residential: At least two highstyle houses survive from this period: one is well-detailed twin rear wall chimney house on Prospect Street. The other is the highstyle end chimney Federal/Greek Revival Liberty Bigelow House (1828) topped with a round cupola apparently modelled after the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates, a classical temple illustrated in the Antiquities of Athens (Stuart and Revett, 1762); its use in Melrose must be seen as highly unusual and indicative of considerable sophistication on the part of either the client or the builder/architect, William Foster. Other period houses are vernacular interior or rear wall chimney examples, much more simply detailed and probably dating somewhat earlier than the Bigelow House.

Institutional: In 1816, the Methodist Episcopal Church was established and a school was built; neither structure is believed extant.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highways and turnpikes remain from early 19th century with improvement of N/S axis as Boston & Maine railroad around Ell Pond plain 1845 with depots at Wyoming and Melrose Highlands. In addition early horse railroad to Stoneham 1860 along Franklin Street as independent route from depot.

B. Population:

Pre-railroad population, 1845, limited to 400 people and 35 houses (Gould, 1915). After arrival of Boston & Maine (1845) and incorporation of town (1850), population by later date reached 1,260. Doubled in next decade and reached 3,414 by 1870. Relatively small foreign-born population (13%) by 1865.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Continued expansion of Main Street axis as commercial and civic center with shift of focus to railroad around Wyoming and Melrose Highlands depots. Affluent suburban district emerges around westside Ell Pond and highlands with modest residential area on eastside Upham Street axis.

D. Economic Base:

Agricultural economy, now supplemented in a major way by shoemaking. In 1855, annual product in shoes amounted to nearly \$100,000. By 1865 it had reached a peak of \$325,000. In the same year, beef cattle sent to market were worth \$120,000.

E. Architecture:

Residential: With the arrival of the railroad in 1845 came a wave of suburban residential development. Many modest, well-detailed center entrance Italianate houses, some with cupolas, were built around the town center and to the southwest. Although the Italianate house was the norm for the period, at least one highstyle, possibly architect-designed Gothic Revival villa (on Ell Pond) was constructed (1852) as was a particularly well-preserved grouping of porticoed, sidehall Greek Revival cottages on Cottage Street. In addition to these more substantial cottages, a number of simpler mansard cottages were constructed toward the end of the period. At least one early tenement (c. 1865) is known, alongside the railroad

tracks on Emerson Street. Some suburban Italianate/Second Empire houses were constructed in the 1860s, while a few may even date from the late 1850s (see below).

Commercial: The construction of a three-story Second Empire commercial block on Main Street in 1859 indicates that the mansard roof was in use in Melrose before the Civil War. At least one other mansard-roofed brick commercial block (1866), also at the town center, is known.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Expansion of streetcar routes to Melrose Center from Malden and Wakefield. Primary N/S line along Main Street by 1880s with local loop to Eastside on Upham-Grove Street by 1890s and connections to Saugus on Howard Street.

B. Population:

There were 706 dwellings in 1874. Steadily increasing growth rate, reaching a peak 1890-95 as town grew by 690 people a year. By 1915 population had reached 16,880, nearly five times what it had been in 1870. In 1905, 22% of the population had been born abroad, with nearly equal numbers coming from Ireland, Nova Scotia, and other parts of English-speaking Canada.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Expansion of suburban residential development from railroad depots on west side with status neighborhood along Vinton Street-Highlands axis and parallel district on east side Upham Street axis with tract housing extended along Lebanon Street to Malden and north to Wakefield. Commercial and civic focus remains at Melrose Center on Main Street with industrial activities along railroad corridor.

D. Economic Base:

Major event of the period was the establishment near the Malden Line in 1883-84 of the Boston Rubber Shoe Company's plant number 2. (The first had been built by Elisha Converse in Malden in 1853.) The plant employed 1200 people and became much the largest employer in this non-industrial town. The town during this period became basically residential in character as increasing numbers of farms were subdivided for housing lots. No efforts were made to attract further industry. Several small operations did locate near the railroad or Main Street in 1890s or later, but none made a significant impact.

E. Architecture:

Residential: A full range of Second Empire, Stick, Queen Anne, Shingle Style, Colonial Revival and Craftsman houses were constructed with some highstyle, architect-designed examples and many well-detailed suburban examples. Older neighborhoods filled in with substantial Queen Anne and Shingle Style houses while at Melrose Highlands, northwest of the town center, entire blocks of ambitious, suburban houses were built in the 1890s and early 20th century. A second highstyle neighborhood of large Colonial Revival houses developed at the crest of Upham Street. Particularly noteworthy is a group of highly decorative Craftsman houses (c. 1910) on Franklin Street; many retain elaborate pebbledash, stucco and half-timbered detail. In addition to single-family houses, a few highstyle apartment blocks began to built along Main Street and at scattered locations elsewhere; especially notable are two pretentious yellow brick Georgian Revival blocks on Main Street at Wyoming and a Mission style block on Emerson Street. Only a few multiple family dwellings were constructed, mostly Queen Anne double houses along Pleasant Street with at least a few double bay double houses of the type found at Waltham, located on Upham Street.

Institutional: Most of Melrose's institutional structures were built in this period including many churches and municipal buildings. Among the churches constructed are the Gothic Revival Trinity Church (1886, Charles Brigham; gift of the Tyer family); the fieldstone Romanesque First Methodist (1904, architect unknown) and the Gothic Revival First Baptist (1907, G. F. Newton). A number of schools survive, including several Renaissance Revival examples (1886, 1895, 1897) along with important municipal structures such as the High Victorian Gothic City Hall (1873; missing mansard roof) and neoclassical Memorial Hall (1912, G. F. Newton) as well as the Romanesque Rival Y.M.C.A. (1894, Hartwell, Richardson and Driver).

Commercial: A number of well-preserved two and three-story brick commercial blocks in Queen Anne, Romanesque and Renaissance Revival styles, built in the 1880s, and early '90s, stand along Main Street at the town center.

Industrial: The most notable industrial structure surviving is the Boston Rubber Shoe complex on Washington Street, a four-story brick complex built in 1884, corbelled Romanesque design apparently derived from an earlier structure which burned in 1870.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Abandonment of trolley routes to Malden Center with improvement of local highways as autoroutes by 1930s including Metropolitan District Commission East Fellsway around Melrose Highlands and Ell Pond plain.

B. Population:

Population grew at a fairly steady rate -- on the average of about 200-250 per year except during the boom years of 1925-30. By 1940 the population had reached 25,333 -- about twice its 1900 population. By 1975 it had grown by an additional 7,000 people.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Continued development of suburban residential areas with affluent expansion around Franklin Street highlands on west side and Upham Street neighborhood on east side. Modest subdivisions extended on Lebanon Street axis to Malden and Wakefield. Commercial and civic focus remains along Main Street axis with multiple family development around depots and industrial expansion along railroad corridor.

D. Economic Base:

Most significant event was the closing of the Boston Rubber Shoe plant in 1929, operations being transferred to Malden. In 1927 Melrose had 26 manufacturing establishments, employing 597. Friend Brothers, manufacturer of canned baked beans, was largely responsible for popularizing "Boston Baked Beans" in the first quarter of the century.

E. Architecture:

Residential: A few suburban bungalows were built in more affluent neighborhoods north and west of the center along with some more conservative and substantial Dutch Colonial and Colonial Revival single family houses; at least a few Colonial Revival cape cottages, especially those along Upham Street, may date as early as the 1930s. Some of the houses built in the period may be early works by architect Royal Barry Wills, a Melrose native whose careful reproductions of 18th-century house types become the epitome in traditional residential design in post-War suburban Boston. In addition to more ambitious single family dwellings, a number of modest single family houses, with some two-families and more ambitious apartment blocks were constructed, the single family examples concentrated to the east of the town center.

Institutional: The bulk of the institutional buildings constructed are brick schools in revival designs. Portions of the Melrose-Wakefield Hospital also date from the period.

Commercial: One and two story reinforced concrete and brick commercial blocks in restrained Moderne designs were constructed at the town center; similar small-scale, one-story cornerstone blocks were built in scattered locations along Main Street and at secondary neighborhood commercial centers.

Industrial: At least one well-detailed Dutch Colonial office building appends a 1920s industrial complex on Essex Street.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

Only two of Melrose's industrial structures are noted in the city's inventory, Boston Rubber Shoe, and the housing at Ravine Terrace, once part of the Haywardville (Stoneham) rubber plant (misdated). Other structures include the Shepard silverware plant (344 Franklin); the two-story brick Chesterton plant at Ingalls Court, Sircom's 1912 three-story brick factory at 22 Corey Street, and immediately adjacent to 10 Corey, the three-story wood-frame preserving plant of Friend Bros. There is also a stone arch bridge (c. 1845) carrying the Boston & Maine tracks over Melrose Street. Existing survey identifies major individual structures and important residential and commercial districts, but documentation is inconsistent.

XII. SOURCES

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