

# MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

## NORTH READING

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: North Reading

### I. TOPOGRAPHY

Town occupies 13.5 square miles of the northeast extremity of Middlesex County. It lies entirely within the watershed of the Ipswich River, which passes through the center of the town. This river and two small tributaries, Skug and Martin's brooks, are the principal water sources of the town; only the Ipswich provided limited water power. Martin's Pond and Swan Pond are the largest bodies of water, located at opposite ends of the town.

### II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Originally within Reading town grant of 1644 from Lynn Village division of 1639 with annex north of Ipswich River 1651 and apparent survival of Andover 17th century boundary as northern town line. Formation as Reading North Parish 1713, with boundaries at Wilmington and Middleton during mid-18th century. Created as independent town of North Reading 1853 with boundary at Reading line.

### III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Outlying suburban town on periphery of northern Boston metropolitan area with access to Salem and Lawrence cores. Located along Ipswich River with documented native sites around Skug River and Martins Pond. Early English settlement grants on Ipswich River by mid-17th century with reported First Period blockhouse survival off Haverhill Street near State Forest. On frontier of instability during Queen Anne's War; corridor of agricultural settlement along Ipswich River, including late 17th century mill site at West Village and some suspected Late First Period houses on outlying roads. Town center formation by early 18th century around meeting house common with high style Georgian example and array of Colonial houses along Elm Street axis. Turnpike location by early 19th century shifts activity to West Village area, although town center maintains civic focus with Federal style meeting house and affluent Federal village along Haverhill and Chestnut Streets (south side), with well-preserved district of period houses. Local railroad corridor to Salem through town center during mid-19th century prompts modest expansion around meeting house common with notable Victorian town hall. Development during early 20th century remains limited to market agriculture and local highway activity along Main Street axis with modest summer homes around Martin's Pond. At present town center retains complete historic fabric with pressure of growth evident along primary regional highways in western area and in suburban residential development of peripheral highlands.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Corridor of regional routes along Ipswich River between Merrimack and Saugus cores. Primary E/W trail appears to follow Park-East-Elm Streets through North Reading center with conjectured ford over Ipswich at Park Street to south side, and branch around Martin's Brook west at Winter Street. Primary N/S trail links from Saugus (Reading) appear to follow axis of Haverhill Street to Chestnut Cedar and Mill Street with probable ford site across Ipswich at West Village. It appears likely that trail connections from Ipswich and Skug Rivers to Martin's and Swan Ponds existed, but no obvious candidates appear to survive in north highlands.

B. Settlement Pattern:

No known period sites. Several sites reported along Ipswich River and Martin's Brook but little or no information available. Additional sites are possible on well drained terraces along these waterways and around Martin's and other ponds.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Rugged upland area was probably used primarily as a hunting and resource area. Wintering and ice fishing sites adjacent to ponds.

D. Observations:

Little known about period occupation or occupants.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails improved as regional highways with settlement of estate farms on Ipswich during mid 17th century. Primary E/W highway appears as West-Park-Elm Streets with Winter Street connector to east. Loop of roads around Brook Farm as Park-Chestnut-Cedar Streets with probable ford at Park Street across Ipswich.

B. Population:

Six families here prior to 1680.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Original grants of large farmsteads along Ipswich River during mid-17th century with Brook Farm on Chestnut Street upland. Precise pattern remains unclear except as dispersed agricultural district of Reading town development.

D. Economic Base:

Subsistence farming only.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Formation of North Reading town center at Ipswich ford by early 18th century creates radial road network from meeting house with N/S highway at Haverhill Street and E/W route across highlands at North-Marblehead Streets by mid-18th century.

B. Population:

By 1720, 39 members of the church -- about 53 taxpayers. By 1771 there were in the parish 66 voters. Total population of the three towns -- apparently nearly equally divided between Wakefield, North Reading, and Reading -- was 1,530 in 1765.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Formation of North Reading town center with meeting house common of 1717 at regional highway junction along Haverhill-Park Streets. Secondary center at West Village mill by late 17th century with development along Ipswich River corridor of Park-Elm Streets during mid-18th century.

D. Economic Base:

Subsistence farming. Lob's Pond (or "Pound") sawmill by 1694; grist and saw mills at village center by 1794. Site near Middleton line occupied by saw mill by 1677. Probably some home shoemaking.

E. Architecture:

Residential: North Reading retains a number of simple and well-preserved mid 18th century center-chimney vernacular houses, as well as at least single examples of the use of the more highstyle gambrel and double-hipped roofs and a relatively advanced instance of the center-hall plan in one house on Elm Street probably dating before the mid-century. As many as three houses in the town may date to the late First Period, or shortly thereafter, c. 1730. In addition to the several highstyle Georgian houses constructed at the town center and on Elm Street, there are a number of cottages, most of them probably dating toward the end of the period, as well as at least one gambrel-roofed center chimney cottage. One center-hall plan stone house, probably dating before 1740, as it seems originally to have had casement windows, is recorded in a mid 19th century photograph, but does not survive.

Institutional, Commercial, Industrial: No early institutional, commercial or industrial structures are known to survive, although the First Parish meetinghouse (1717) and several mills were built. Remains of one mill site survive on Mill Street but probably date from the early 19th century, as does one possible early shoe shop, located on Marblehead Street at the Middleton border.

## VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

### A. Transportation Routes:

Improvement of N/S links to Boston-Merrimack with Andover Turnpike through West Village (1806) at Main Street and local improvement of Haverhill Street south from town center with bridge across Ipswich and Chestnut Street connector.

### B. Population:

Figures unavailable, but probably slow growth from around 500 in 1790 to perhaps 800 in 1830.

### C. Settlement Pattern:

Location of Andover Turnpike (Main Street) shifts primary commercial activity to West Village axis, although civic focus remains at North Reading town common. Chestnut Street village emerges as core of affluent development with modest expansion along Haverhill Street axis.

### D. Economic Base:

Primarily subsistence farming with limited hop production. Boot and shoemaking prominent by 1820, but figures unavailable. All three mill privileges on the Ipswich River by 1820s in possession of Flint family.

### E. Architecture:

Residential: A number of interior and rear-wall chimney vernacular Federal style houses survive at the town center, at Harmony Vale, and along Park and Elm Streets. In addition to these houses, there are also several well-preserved highstyle Federal houses, including one or two end-chimney examples, and a few houses embellished with pediments, blind fanlights, and leaded transoms.

Institutional, Commercial, Industrial: The present First Parish Church on the Common was built in 1827 and is a simple Federal/Greek Revival structure with a one-stage belfry. Although several district schools, mills, shoe shops, and two taverns (on the Andover Turnpike) are known, none are known to survive.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1875)

A. Transportation Routes:

Local highways remain intact from early 19th century with improvement of internal connectors from Ipswich crossing as Central Street and Concord Street. Regional rail link E/W along Ipswich Valley as Lowell and Salem (1850) with depot on south side of town center (now abandoned route).

B. Population:

Slow and gradual growth of population to peak of 1,203 in 1860-- a figure which was not reached again until 1915. Foreign-born population insignificant during this period.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Opening of Salem railroad along Ipswich River shifts focus of town center to south side around Haverhill Street depot, although growth remains modest. Chestnut Street village remains as status residential village with secondary center at West Village on Andover Turnpike (Main Street) and extended axis of development along Ipswich corridor of West-Park-Elm Streets from town center.

D. Economic Base:

Shoemaking largely responsible for growth of North Reading during this period. "By 1850 there was a shop attached or placed by the side of nearly every dwelling house in the precinct" (Eaton, 1896). This trade was slashed dramatically by the intervention of the Civil War and the loss of southern markets. The town's declining population, as a result, is one of the most marked of any in the county. Some cabinetwork also carried on, but farming remained town's most profitable base during the Civil War and afterward. In 1865 there were 88 farms.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Most of the dwellings constructed in the period are vernacular Greek Revival sidehall cottages with a number of later examples built after 1850 exhibiting elements of the Italianate; these survive in good numbers throughout the town. A few Greek Revival/Italianate double houses were built, but almost no highstyle Greek Revival or Italianate and no temple front houses are known.

Institutional: The Union Congregational Church, a temple front structure built c. 1840, is the town's only highstyle Greek Revival building; also constructed in the period, but not surviving, was a board and batten Gothic Revival Baptist Chapel (1865). A post office was established at North Reading in 1830.

Commercial, Industrial: Five stores, two wheelwrights, and one blacksmith were recorded in 1844; several mills and shoe shops were also undoubtedly in operation, but all of these ventures were most probably housed in semi-domestic settings. Some of these structures, now unrecognized, survive.

## IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1875-1915)

### A. Transportation Routes:

Rail and road systems remain in place with extension of regional trolley routes from Reading-Andover along Main Street with local branch to town center at Winter-Park Streets by 1905.

### B. Population:

Continued population decline, reaching 835 in 1895. Slow population rise after that date, attaining 1,292 by 1915 -- a figure only slightly higher than that of 1860. Of the 14% foreign-born population in 1905, most were from Nova Scotia.

### C. Settlement Pattern:

Modest expansion of town center along Haverhill and Park-Elm Streets with affluent district around Chestnut Street (south side). Secondary activity along Main Street trolley line from West Village.

### D. Economic Base:

As shoe trade continued to decline, increasing attention given to agricultural products. A pickle factory in Somerville led many farmers in the 1870s to plant cucumbers; in the 1880s and '90s, strawberries were a frequent crop.

### E. Architecture:

Residential: Only a very few modest Queen Anne vernacular houses and cottages were built in North Reading. Most of these are located in outlying areas, with a very few around the town center.

Institutional, Commercial, Industrial: The Flint Memorial Hall is the only highstyle building dating from the period in North Reading. Built c. 1870, it is an intact three-story frame Italianate/Second Empire building with a gambrel, gabled mansard roof. Some simple small-scale one-story shopfronts at the center probably date around the turn of the century.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Abandonment of local street and stream railroad connections to town center by mid-20th century and improvement of local highways as auto roads with primary N/S Route 28 (Main Street) as Boston-Lawrence axis during 1930s, including dated concrete bridge across Ipswich (1931), and E/W Route 62 (Lowell-Winter-Elm Streets) through town center.

B. Population:

New highways led to establishment of increasing number of summer as well as permanent homes and estates. Increased growth in period 1920-40, averaging 80 people a year. By 1940, population reached 2,886.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Growth remains modest with civic focus around town center, suburban district at Chestnut Street village, and commercial highway development along Main Street axis from West Village with residential tract subdivisions around Martin's Pond.

D. Economic Base:

Abbott Shoe Company, begun in a small way in 1840s, incorporated 1919 with factory enlargement two years later. Milk the principal product of the town, and with apples and small fruits, comprised principal farm shipments.

E. Architecture:

Residential: A few shingled and cobble basemented Colonial Revival bungalows and other simpler Craftsman cottages were built around Martin's Pond in the 'teens and 1920s, with a very few Colonial Revival cottages and houses possibly built as early as the late 1930s.

Institutional, Commercial, Industrial: A few Georgian or Colonial Revival schools may have been built; also, a few early commercial buildings may survive along Main Street (Route 28).



XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

No large-scale industrial operations either noted in MHC survey file or observed in the field. However, rural character of the town has preserved a large number of small shoe shops from the Early and Late industrial periods -- in several instances surprisingly intact. Any further survey work should make an attempt to identify the best of these.

XII. SOURCES

Eaton, Chester W. and Warren Eaton, eds., Proceedings of the 250th Anniversary of the Ancient Town of Reading (Reading, 1896).

Eaton, Lilley, Genealogical History of the Town of Reading (Boston, 1874).

LePage, Samuel Maynard, A History of North Reading (Wakefield, 1944).