

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

WAKEFIELD

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.

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MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION

William Francis Galvin, Secretary of the Commonwealth

Chair, Massachusetts Historical Commission

220 Morrissey Blvd.

Boston, MA 02125

www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc

mhc@sec.state.ma.us / 617-727-8470

MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

Date: 1980

Community: Wakefield

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Town occupies 7.9 square miles mostly in the watershed of the Saugus River, which originates in Wakefield at Lake Quannopowitt. A tributary of the Saugus River, Mill River, flows out of Wakefield's other major body of water, Crystal Lake. Both rivers provided waterpower sites during the 18th and 19th centuries. The central village -- and the earliest 17th century settlement of old Reading -- is located on a plain between the two lakes, and runs up the gentle slopes of Shingle Hill on the east and Cowdry's Hill and Cedar Hill on the west. In the southwest, the town shares with Stoneham a small portion of the more rugged topography of the Middlesex Fells, and this area of hills and marsh land is tributary to the Mystic River via Spot Pond Brook and the Malden River.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Originally established as part of Lynn town grant 1639 Lynn Village with independent town formation as Reading 1644 and meeting house at Wakefield common 1645. Much of 17th century grant separated as parish precincts during 18th century with remaining portion as First Parish. Southern section annexed from Malden as Greenwood 1729 and boundaries established with Stoneham&Saugus by mid-18th century. Formed as South Reading town 1812 with boundary at original First Parish line (Reading). Name changed to Wakefield (1868) with annex from Stoneham 1889 and minor adjustments with Melrose and Saugus during early 20th century.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Suburban industrial town on northern axis of metropolitan Boston. Located at headwaters of Saugus River with reported native planting fields on Lake Quannapowitt (originally Great Pond) south plain at focus of regional trails. Early English town center of Reading grant at base of Lake during mid-17th century along Church Street axis with mill site on Water St. at Mill River. One notable late First Period house with well-preserved burying ground including elaborate period stones. Primary civic and commercial core develops along Main Street axis on Lake plain during Colonial period with some surviving mid-18th century houses along radial highways from town common, especially along Prospect Street Hill. Continued modest

expansion of town center during early 19th century with Federal houses along Salem Street Hill and Lake Shore off Main Street axis. Important industrial development with Boston-Merrimac railroad during mid-19th century with speciality manufacture of domestic products, including boots and shoes, bathtubs, neckties and rattan chair works with survival of several Late Industrial period brick and woodframe factories around rail junction of Water-North-Main Streets. Residential districts develop around town center rail depot with affluent suburban expansion along Prospect Street Hill and worker's district along North, Water and Vernon Streets with typical period house types. Independent suburban area forms around Greenwood depot along Main Street trolley route including Shingle Style church and Colonial Revival houses at Oak Street. Fringe development extends along rail axis from town center during mid-19th century with cemetery district on western Lake Shore, including early Jewish Picturesque example. Civic center remains around town common with landmark brick and stone Romanesque churches and school while commercial center shifts to rail junction with some surviving Victorian brick business blocks and well-preserved period depot. Suburban expansion continues through Early Modern period with status area on Prospect Street, including expansive Mission Revival estates with a similar affluent district along Main Street Lake Shore with Historic Revival examples. Greenwood section remains independent neighborhood with multiple family housing along Main Street carline. Commercial highway activity develops during 20th century along E/W Lowell Street axis around Montrose area with notable Moderne bottling plant and some period gas stations including Wigwam example. Present development continues as stable suburban area, although industrial core at rail junction appears to suffer from decline while intense pressure of growth is evident along Route 128 corridor around Lake Quannapowitt Saugus River axis.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Focus of regional routes at the headwaters of the Saugus River around Lake Quannapowitt. Primary N/S trail from Mystic to Saugus valleys appears as Main Street along Crystal Lake and Lake Quannapowitt with alternate branch along Mill River as Vernon Street. Connecting trails from east conjectured as Nahant-North and Water Streets, and from west as Albion-Gould-Cedar and Elm Streets around Prospect Street hill with link to Lake Quannapowitt as Church Street with a likely possibility

that Prospect Street follows a highland trail from the lake plain. Similarly, Oak Street might be considered as a trail candidate between Main and Nahant Streets.

B. Settlement Pattern:

No period sites have been archaeologically verified; documentary sources indicate native settlement and planting fields along the south shore of Lake Quannapowitt. Additional sites reported near Crystal Lake, plus some rockshelters in southeastern part of town.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Good agricultural lands around Lake Quannapowitt plus the lake's fishing potential (spring - spawning ground/winter - ice fishing) made this a probable focal point for native activities as well as hunting/gathering.

D. Observations:

Location at head of the Saugus watershed made this a likely wintering area for coastal groups, probably from the Lynn/Revere area.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails improved as highways with formation of Reading town in 1640s at base of Lake Quannapowitt (now Wakefield Center). Main Street remains as primary N/S road between Malden and Andover with connecting E/W highways to Saugus as Water Street and Medford as Church-Prospect Streets.

B. Population:

Settled as Lynn Village, beginning in 1639. By 1667 parish (including what is now Reading) contained 59 houses, most of which were in Wakefield.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Establishment of Reading meeting house at foot of Lake Quannapowitt (Great Pond) in 1645 creates town center on Church St. (Wakefield common). Apparently farm lots granted as dispersed village along main highways around Lake Quannapowitt plain during mid 17th century, although no precise documentation of settlement pattern. Mill site established on Water Street at Mill River by 1644 at time of original settlement.

D. Economic Base:

Predominantly subsistence agriculture, although some shoemaking may have been undertaken. Earliest grist mill established by

John Poole, 1644, on Mill River at later Rattan company site.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highways remain from mid 17th century with focus of routes at the Reading meeting house (Wakefield Center). Primary north-south road continues as Main Street around Lake Quannapowitt, with alternate as Salem-Vernon Street around Fitch Hill. Water and North-Nahant Streets connect to Saugus-Lynn around Mill River with Oak Street as a connector to Main Street. Western routes to Stoneham around Cowdry's Hill as Church-Elm and Cedar-Gould-Albion with Prospect Street over hill. Other period roads appear as east-west Salem-Lowell Street over the Saugus River and Bay State Road between Main and Vernon Streets, with Greenwood Street from Crystal Lake south.

B. Population:

By 1771, there were about 80 voters in what is now Wakefield, slightly higher than that of Reading (63) and North Reading (66). Total population of the three parishes in 1765 was 1,530.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Continued expansion of town center from meeting house common (Wakefield) around Lake Quannapowitt with principal settlement on Main Street axis and farmsteads on Prospect Street (Cowdrey's Hill) and Salem Street (Fitch's Hill) by mid-18th century. Additional settlement in Greenwood area from Malden grant by late 18th century.

D. Economic Base:

Shoemaking given early start by town. Jonas Eaton granted 1677 wood and herbage privilege on condition that he remain in town as shoemaker. By mid-18th century shoemaking already a thriving home industry which had advanced from bespoke to extra-sale work.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Clusters of center chimney houses survive along Prospect Street and at the intersection of Vernon and Salem Streets; most have the standard five-bay configuration, but a few half houses have survived. At least one center chimney house with a beverly job stands on Oak Street. The presence of half-houses and the predominance of center chimney examples (only a very few paired chimney, center hall plan houses appear to date from the period) suggest a general conservatism and lack of affluence during the colonial period.

Institutional, Commercial, Industrial: The second meeting-house (c. 1750) survived into the 19th century and was an end porch structure with a belfry at one end. Other institutional structures are not known although it is likely that several district schools were constructed. Commercial activity was probably small scale and confined to domestic settings. Saw-mill sites are recorded at the north of town and along North Street.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Improvement of N/S highway to Boston as Main Street through Wakefield Center with Lowell-Salem Streets as E/W highway around Lake Quannapowitt from Salem to Reading.

B. Population:

Census figures not available before 1830, by which point population had reached 1,311 -- up from probably about 5-600 in 1765.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Town center around Wakefield common remained as primary civic and commercial core with axis along Main Street and residential development along Church-Salem Streets during early 19th century. Mill site on Water Street continues to expand as secondary focus with local village center on Main Street in Greenwood section.

D. Economic Base:

Principal industry, shoemaking, led by Thomas Emerson (1805) and many other small shops. By 1832 the business employed full or part time 350 men and 100 women, and produced \$225,000 worth of shoes annually. Ancillary to this production was the manufacture of shoe tools, especially awls, as early as 1810. (Thomas Woodward was reputed to have introduced the first American production of awls.) Razor straps were invented and manufactured here by Charles Emerson.

Burrage Yale first came to Wakefield in 1810 as an itinerant tin peddler, but shortly after established a successful tinplate works. Eventually he employed 100 peddlers and sent wagons all over New England. His factory, at the corner of Yale Avenue and Main Street, was later enlarged for the Emerson Shoe Factory. There were also 3 grist and 3 saw mills on the Saugus and Mill rivers.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Many houses were constructed during the Federal period: an 1836 view of the town center shows a tight village of end and paired chimney houses. Although very few of these survive in the town center, many examples remain just outside the center on Prospect, Salem, Vernon and Main Streets. At least one highstyle brick end chimney hip roofed house survives: the Eaton House, at the corner of Main and Salem. Other examples somewhat less elaborate, but with hip roofs and end chimneys, have also survived. Double houses and cottages survive with less frequency. Although one substantial Federal/Greek Revival house is known, transitional Federal/Greek Revival houses appear to have been rare, suggesting either that little construction took place at the end of the first quarter of the 19th century, or that local tastes were conservative, hence retaining the Federal forms of the early century.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD

A. Transportation Routes:

Highways remained focused at Wakefield Center with additional emphasis with regional rail connections during mid-19th century. Primary N/S route as Boston & Maine 1845 with branch to Salem 1850 (now abandoned) and branch to Danvers 1853 along Mill River creating important rail junction at town center. Local road connection from rail depot as North, Albion, and New Salem Streets with links to Greenwood area as Forest and Spring Streets.

B. Population:

Slow growth until coming of the rail lines, 1840s and '50s. By 1855 population had more than doubled the figure of 25 years previous, reaching 2,758 in that year. Population boom in the post-Civil War years, 1865-70. By 1870, 4,135 people in town, of which about 8% were of Irish birth.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Location of Boston railroad depot at North Avenue shifts focus of town center to South Main Street area around industrial sites during mid-19th century. Related residential expansion evident on North Avenue, Albion and Water Streets, with secondary suburban depot at Greenwood on Spring Street. Industrial fringe development along railroad axis of Mill River to Montrose area (Vernon-Lowell Streets) and along western Lake Quannapowitt shore with cemeteries.

D. Economic Base:

Principal business remained in shoes, and the annual product value continued to rise throughout period. (As a result of the loss of the southern trade during the Civil War, there was a sharp decline during the war years, but business rebounded with new markets afterwards.) By 1868, 12 factories were producing over \$400,000 worth. Many small shops were located throughout the town, a number being to the west of the village on Salem Street. Among them was the shop of Thomas Emerson & Son. In 1862 they took over the tin shop of Burrage Yale on Main Street, making it the largest shoe factory in town at that time.

Cyrus Wakefield (1811-1873) arrived in what was then South Reading shortly after the Boston & Maine in 1845. Wakefield's influence, in addition to the railroad's, is directly visible in the two major factories begun in this period -- the Boston and Maine Foundry (1854) and the Wakefield Rattan Co. (1856). Among the foundry products were holloware, including kettles, saucepans, and the like, which the company enameled -- first by sending them to New York, and later by handling this process themselves. The foundry became the first in the country to produce enameled bath tubs. Wakefield's own experience with rattan reeds for hoop skirts suggested the use of rattan in the manufacture of chair-seatings, carpets, and furniture. His success in the business was due to his development of machine processes for splitting the reed and using the whole of the rattan for various products. By 1865 the rattan company employed nearly 300 men and women and was producing goods worth \$357,000.

E. Architecture:

Residential: No highstyle Greek Revival houses are known, but several highstyle Italianate houses are recorded and a few survive. The Greek Revival style is commonly represented by smaller cottages and more traditional center entrance houses; these are located to the east of Lake Quannapowitt, on Cordis, Salem and Vernon Streets and on Prospect Street. The sidehall Italianate house was the most common type of the mid-century. Built in numbers in the neighborhoods east of Main Street and along Oak, Prospect, Salem and Vernon Streets, these simply detailed, modest houses easily evolved into Stick and Queen Anne types toward the end of the period. Mansard roofed houses are more rare, most often surviving in cottage form. A few Gothic cottages are also known. Among the several highstyle Italianate mansions which have not survived was the Cyrus Wakefield house (site of present Armory), probably designed by John Stevens, a local architect; it is unlikely that more than a few residences are architect-designed.

Institutional: Among the surviving institutional structures of this period are the Greek Revival Italianate Universalist Church (1859) and the Greek Revival West Ward School; seven district schools stood in Wakefield in 1844 with the West Ward School added in 1847. Several highstyle buildings, including town's first high school (Second Empire/Italianate) and an elaborate High Victorian Gothic Town Hall (1871) donated by Cyrus Wakefield and designed by John C. Stevens, are no longer extant.

Commercial, Industrial: Several blacksmiths and wheelwrights are known to have been working in Wakefield in 1844, their shops along with several taverns, probably located along the Turnpike route. A bank and eight stores also operated in the period. Cottage shoe industry predominated early in the period, giving way by the end of the period to full scale industrial production. No industrial buildings of this period are known to survive.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Railroads remained focused at Wakefield junction with regional highways. Extension of streetcar lines from Stoneham, Melrose, Reading and Saugus creates additional focus at town center by early 20th century with routes along Main, North, Water and Albion Streets.

B. Population:

Steady growth between 1870 (4,135) and 1915 (12,781), interrupted significantly only once in the late 1870s. Of the 26% foreign-born population in 1905, Ireland and Nova Scotia together accounted for about half.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Expansion of suburban residential development from North Avenue railroad axis with affluent neighborhoods along Prospect and Pleasant Street hills around town center and worker's district along Water and Vernon Streets. Secondary suburban area develops along Main Street axis in Greenwood with focus at Spring-Oak Streets, and in Montrose along Lowell Street. Industrial activity continues to expand around railroad junction at Water Street along Mill River axis.

D. Economic Base:

In the late 1860s and early '70s, Cyrus Wakefield remained active in encouraging business development. In addition to his gift of the town hall, he built two large commercial/industrial blocks opposite it. The Wakefield Block (still standing) provided the first home for the Harvard Knitting Mills, and the prestigious Henry F. Miller & Son Piano Company eventually moved into the adjacent 6-story mansard building behind the town hall. In the early '70s, the town's fortunes were adversely affected by the combined disasters of the financial panic of 1872 and the death of Cyrus Wakefield, post-humously insolvent, the following year.

In 1879 the Smith & Anthony Stove Company took over the ailing Franklin (nee Boston & Maine) Foundry and for the remainder of the period did a successful (and international) trade in cooking ranges, furnaces, and heating stoves. The 1890s saw considerable new industrial construction. Adjacent to the foundry, the Harvard Knitting Mills began in 1896 the extensive brick complex which today dominates the Foundry Street industrial area. About the same time, George Harrison invented and patented the lead-lined iron pipe which in the 1890s his company furnished to major office buildings in Boston and elsewhere. Shoemaking remained a dominant industry: L. B. Evans began the present wood-frame factory on Water Street in 1894. The rattan works also built new buildings in this decade.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Neighborhoods southeast of the town center around factories filled in with vernacular two family houses and cottages, most simple Queen Anne and Colonial Revival examples with gabled porches. Along Water Street, a few three deckers, mostly frame buildings but a few in brick, were built. The Greenwood section in the south of town began to be developed with modest suburban Queen Anne, Colonial Revival and Shingle Style houses while more well-detailed and ambitious housing in the same styles was concentrated west of the town center. Still, few highstyle and/or architect-designed houses were constructed.

Institutional: Probably the most significant building constructed in the period is the 1st Congregational Church, a granite Richardsonian Romanesque design with an offset tower (Hartwell and Richardson, 1890). Other important churches are the Shingle Style/Queen Anne Greenwood Union Church (c. 1892, architect unknown) and a stuccoed Craftsman church on lower Main Street at Street. In addition, several substantial Renaissance Revival turn of the century brick schools survive. The pagoda-like bandstand by Lake Quannapowitt probably dates from the period.

Commercial: A number of important commercial buildings in brick and stone were built at the town center in the period, including the three-story Second Empire brick Wakefield Block (which has lost its mansard roof), the Renaissance Revival Odd Fellows Hall, a three-story High Victorian Gothic building (1875) and several Georgian and Classical Revival structures dating after the turn of the century.

Industrial: A wealth of late 19th and early 20th century industrial buildings, most of them utilitarian designs in brick, survives in Wakefield. Three and four stories tall, these are concentrated just east of the town center and at Wakefield Junction.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Abandonment of local trolley routes to town center by 1920s and improvement of existing roads as auto highways with primary N/S Route 129 (Main-Water Streets) and E/W as original Route 128 (Albion-New Salem-Lowell Streets).

B. Population:

But for the five years between 1920 and 1925, Wakefield's population in this period grew relatively slowly, in fact declining in the 1935-40 period. Between 1920 and 1925, however, the town experienced a sudden post-war housing boom as the number of new residents grew by over 515 a year.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Continued expansion of suburban residential area from Wakefield Center along Main Street axis. Extensive affluent neighborhood developed along Prospect Street hill and along eastern shore of Lake Quannapowitt (Main Street) hill. Secondary focus at Greenwood with nearly continuous connection of development to Wakefield Center on Main Street. Local commercial center emerges at Lowell-Vernon Street at Montrose with residential expansion on surrounding highground. Commercial strip activity extends along Lowell Street axis at Route 128 junction of Saugus River and outlet of Lake Quannapowitt by mid-20th century.

D. Economic Base:

Few new industries were begun in this period. Wakefield's largest employers were the rattan works ("Heywood-Wakefield" and employing 1000 hands), and the Harvard Knitting Mills (800 operatives). Both had developed small competitors in the production of reed furniture and knit goods. By 1940, L. B. Evans was the oldest shoe manufacturing concern in the country. Among new industries was the Neveroil Company, a manufacturer of self-lubricating bearings.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Very little highstyle Craftsman and/or Historical Revival residential construction took place with the notable exception of two elaborate Mission Style stuccoed houses built at the crest of Prospect Street. Probably architect-designed, the two houses may be the only such well-developed examples in the northern Boston suburbs. While a great many single and two family Craftsman-derived houses were constructed in the 1920s, particularly in the Greenwood section, few even approach the Prospect Street houses in plan or detail.

Institutional: Several well-detailed brick Colonial and Georgian Revival schools remain from the teens and 1920s.

Commercial: One and two story brick and concrete storefronts began to fill in the town center; more small scale commercial building took place along Main Street in the Greenwood section. Only a few imposing structures, among them a Beaux-Arts Classical bank building at the center, were built; a few buildings exhibit modest Moderne detailing, but most display traditional classical motifs.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

Wakefield has no town survey.

Two small gems are the pumping station of the Wakefield Water Company (1883, on Crystal Lake) and the B & M Wakefield Upper Station (1889, Tuttle Street). Although the six story mansard Miller Piano Company factory has been torn down, probably within the last 20 years, most of Wakefield's other 19th century industries survive in part or in their entirety, including three buildings of the rattan works (1892, Water St.), the L. B. Evans Shoe Company (1894, Water Street), and Harvard Knitting Mills (1896, Foundry Street). The small wood-frame Wakefield Center Depot (c. 1870?, Water Street) and the Neveroil Bearing Company (29 Foundry Street) are other significant survivals. Potential NR buildings: Wakefield Upper Station and Wakefield Rattan.

XII. SOURCES

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