

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

WOBURN

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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MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

Date: November 11, 1980

Community: Woburn

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Town occupies 13.1 square miles of the Fells Upland district. Woburn Center is located on a relatively flat plateau of about 100 feet elevation bounded by hills on the east and west -- including three of Woburn's major peaks, Horn Pond and Blueberry mountains and Rag Rock Hill. In North Woburn, this plateau, dotted with small hills, drops toward the Wilmington swamps.

Almost all of the town is drained by two branches of the Mystic River -- the Aberjona River on which most of the waterpower sites were located, and Horn Pond Brook, whose tributaries -- Shaker Glen, Sucker, and Fowle Brooks -- drain most of the western part of the town. The small manufacturing center of Montvale was begun in the valley of the Aberjona at the eastern extremity of the town.

Horn Pond, the town's major body of water, is a kettle hole and marks the course of the pre-glacial Merrimack through Woburn, a route subsequently followed by the Middlesex canal.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Originally an outlying village of the Charlestown grant. Established as town of Woburn in 1642. Boundary with Lexington is a surviving 1636 Eight Mile Line. Parish separation of northern districts resulted in formation of Wilmington (1730) and Burlington (1799) with 19th century adjustments of 1725 eastern line. Southern boundary established with Winchester (1850) with later annexation of Horn Pond Mountain for water reservoir.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Suburban industrial city on important northern axis of metropolitan Boston. Located along upper Mystic Valley in Fells highlands. Suspected native sites along Horn Pond and Aberjona River. Early English town settlement of Woburn Center by mid-17th century; notable First Period burying ground survives as does period highway along Russell St. Colonial development based on tanning and dyeing along Aberjona River. Some extant 18th century houses along outlying roads around town center. Canal and railroad corridor between Boston and Merrimac during early 19th century with historically important houses of Federal period inventors and preserved canal bed in North Woburn. Suburban growth during mid-19th century due to Boston rail connection with town center. Architecture includes period Victorian examples (Gothic, Italianate, Mansard) in surrounding highlands along north Main St. axis to Central Square with workers district in town center lowlands. Continued Early Industrial expansion along Aberjona valley at Montvale with tanning, rubber, and shoe production (little surviving evidence save one tanyard).

Suburban growth around town center during Late Industrial period with some well-preserved Shingle and Historic style houses, landmark Victorian Library, churches, and schools. Gradually absorbed into metropolitan suburban fabric by mid-20th century. Modest residential development along local trolley routes in Montvale and Woburn Highlands; affluent residential district maintained at North Woburn. Peripheral areas retained agricultural landscape through Early Modern period with original greenhouses along Cambridge and Bedford Sts. and intact period tile factory. Town center continues as commercial focus and contains notable examples of Historic Revival gas station and Moderne department store on Main St. Present development is centered around junction of Routes 128 and 93 along Aberjona Valley with intense pressure of commercial and industrial activities. As a result, town center suffers from urban decay with partial abandonment and arson evident in fringe areas.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Regional focus of routes between Boston Basin-Mystic Valley and Shawsheen-Merrimac rivers with connections to Concord and Ipswich rivers. Primary N/S trail from Mystic River appears to follow Main St. (Rt. 38) with Elm Street loop at North Woburn, and conjectured branches east and north from Central Square along Mishawum Rd., Beach-Salem-Pine-Forest Sts. and Alfred-New Boston Sts. across Aberjona River. Primary N/S trail from Menotomy-Mystic (Arlington) follows Cambridge St. (Rt. 3) with apparent highland route over Shaker Hill (Waltham St.). Cross route from Horn Pond-Woburn Center to Vine Brook-Lexington along Lexington-Russell Sts. with former loops along Burlington-Garden St. and original path of Lexington St. preserved as hiking trail along Shaker Glen Brook with connecting link to Vine Brook as Russell-Stonewall Drive. Secondary cross link around Horn Pond presumed to be Pond St. Apparent portion of N/S Shawsheen trail through North Woburn along Pear-Winter Sts. with junction to Elm-Main Sts. along West and Ward Sts. Some portion of trail route along Aberjona survives as fragments of Mill and Washington Sts. from Forest St. Stoneham. Other suspect cross links appear as Lexington, Burlington, and Wyman Sts. to west and northwest.

B. Settlement Pattern:

No known period sites. Unspecified sites reported around Horn Pond and along the Aberjona River. Period sites are probable in these locations as well as along Fowle, Cummings, and Shaker Glen brooks and near upland ponds.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Access to spawning areas used during seasonal fish runs. Some good agricultural land. Rocky uplands and bogs for hunting, trapping, and gathering.

D. Observations:

Fairly rugged country used primarily for wintering sites and as a resource area.

V. FIRST PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails improved as local highways with focus of roads at Woburn town center-Horn Pond by mid-17th century. Main and Cambridge Sts. remained primary N/S routes with Russell-Lexington-Beach-Salem Sts. the important cross link through the town center. (Original town streets of 1644 appear to be native trails, although not documented).

B. Population:

At incorporation in 1642, town contained 30 families, of which about 10-15 probably lived within the present limits of Woburn. By 1675, this number is thought to have doubled.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Original town location on Aberjona River at Montvale (1642); shifted to Woburn Center with meeting house at common (1646). Local histories are unclear about 17th century settlement, but patterns indicate axis of development along Main St. towards North Woburn.

D. Economic Base:

Tanyards supplemented a subsistence agricultural economy from the earliest settlement of the town -- including those of John and Francis Wyman on Wyman Lane, and of Gersham Flagg, in Woburn by 1668. Shoemaking was also undertaken, and during King Philip's War, town taxes were partly paid in shoes.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highways remain from 17th century with Main St. as primary N/S road from Medford, and Cambridge St. from Cambridge. Radial roads from town center which appeared during 18th century include Montvale Ave. to Stoneham and Burlington St. to Burlington.

B. Population:

Smallpox epidemic at start of period cut deeply into population. In 1700 population of Woburn/Winchester/Burlington/Willmington was only 187, rising by 1725 to 305. By the end of the period population of Woburn/Burlington had reached 1,515 -- about 287 families in 228 houses.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Town center remained the primary civic and commercial focus with secondary center at North Woburn by mid-18th century. Mill sites along Aberjona at Montvale and Shaker Glen Brook at West Woburn.

D. Economic Base:

Tanning and shoemaking continued to supplement agriculture. Presumably several saw and grist mills were built along Aberjona during this period, although there is no reference to them in the sources. It is also reported that 43 tons of iron ore were extracted from a mine near Dunham Pond (vicinity of 128 and Main Street) in 1772-73.

E. Architecture

Residential: Woburn retains several simple, well-preserved 18th century houses, and at least one house which may date from the late First Period, the Richardson House on Bow Street, an integral lean-to house which has lost its chimney. Other 18th century houses are vernacular examples, such as the center chimney, gambrel-roofed Count Rumford house, although the center hall plan of the Daniel Thompson House (1760) demonstrates an awareness of the Georgian style. Early photographs indicate that several unusual First Period houses once stood in Woburn; these included: the Converse House (c. 1700?), with a framed overhang across half of the facade; the Cutler House (c. 1700?), (which stood until the late 19th century and had a variety of sash types, including one leaded, diamond-paned window); and the Black House, so-called for its black-painted exterior.

Institutional: A meeting house (1752) built on Town Common; also a Baptist Meeting House (c. 1760?) just north of the Common; no known extant structures.

Commercial: Probably confined to domestic settings at town center; no known extant structures.

Industrial: Several grist and saw mills indicated along the Aberjona River and Shaker Glen Brook; no known structures extant.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Road System intact from 18th century with focus at Woburn town center. Improvement of N/S routes by early 19th century with Main Street through North Woburn, and Washington St. through Montvale. Middlesex Canal from Boston opened 1803 on N/S axis through town center along Horn Pond and Main St. (Original portion intact and restored through North Woburn as historic park).

B. Population:

Population of combined Winchester/Woburn/Burlington at start of period was 1,691. In 1799, the departure of Burlington's 534 reduced Woburn to just over 1200. Further growth was relatively limited until after 1830. In that year, the population reached 1,977.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Woburn town center continued to expand along Main St. as primary civic and commercial center with Middlesex Canal link to Boston. Expansion occurred north to Central Square and west along Lexington St. Secondary centers continued in North Woburn and Montvale.

D. Economic Base:

By 1800, small shoemaking shops were beginning to compete with agriculture for first place among industries; 22 shops were noted at that time. Several large tanneries and bark houses, several cider mills, a bake house, 3 grist mills, 7 sawmills, and various workshops made up the manufacturing economy of Woburn at that date. Despite this activity, one writer's 1815 recollection of Woburn was as "a dull farming town, partaking of the depression that was pretty general after the War of 1812."

E. Architecture

Residential: Several important highstyle, late Georgian and Federal houses survive in Woburn along with a number of simpler vernacular Federal houses. The Loammi Baldwin House (c. 1750, with extensive exterior remodelling, c. 1785) and the north Parish House (1790), both elaborately detailed, pretentious buildings, reflect the canal-related prosperity of North Woburn, where the two stand. Elsewhere, less ambitious Federal brick end and frame houses with well-detailed entrances with side and fan lights stand on Elm, Lexington, Lowell, Russell, and Main Streets. There is one intact farmstead, with a late 18th century center chimney farmhouse, on Ridge Street. A tight grouping of twin rear wall chimney vernacular Federal houses stands just west of the town center.

Institutional: Schoolhouses may have been built, but no institutional structures dating from this period are known extant.

Commercial: Early views show a few simple frame commercial buildings at the town center; none are known to survive.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Canal and roads retained from early 19th century. Period improvement of N/S axis as a rail corridor with Boston and Lowell along Aberjona River through Montvale (1835), branch railroad to Woburn Center (1844) and Stoneham from Montvale (1862). Early horse railroad from North Woburn to town center along Main Street by 1870. Abandonment of Middlesex Canal during 1840's due to rail competition.

B. Population:

Population advanced rapidly during this period, rising on the average by 100 people a year in the 20 years between 1830 and 1850, and by nearly 300 people a year in the 1850-55 period -- despite the separation of Winchester in 1850. A slightly slower growth prevailed 1855-65 (155 per year), but rose again to 312 annually during the post-war years. By 1870, the population had reached 8,560, nearly 20% of whom were of Irish birth.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Civic and commercial focus remained in Woburn Center with suburban expansion on Warren Street Hill over Horn Pond and along Main St. at General Square; additional residential subdivisions at Woburn Highlands along branch railroad. Secondary suburban center in North Woburn. An important industrial village at Montvale on Boston rail link along Washington Street.

D. Economic Base:

For the first 20 years of the period, boot and shoe production was the dominant manufacturing industry. By 1855, however, its place had been taken by tanning and currying, and perhaps more than by anything else, the period is characterized by this transition.

Shoemaking became an important part of Montvale's economy after the construction in 1835 of the Boston & Lowell RR, and with the building of the branch to Woburn Center in 1846, that village too had its share of the trade. Boot and shoe production peaked in Woburn in 1855 with over 880 operatives manufacturing nearly \$280,000 worth of footwear.

In 1837, four tanneries employed 77 hands. By 1865, stimulated by wartime demand for leather, there were 21 tanning and currying plants producing leather valued at over \$1.7 million, employing 554 -- putting Woburn at the head of the tanning industry in the country.

Most of the plants were located east of Main Street in Woburn Center, but under the influence of John Cummings -- who it is said "probably taught more young men the art of tanning than any other leather manufacturer in Massachusetts" -- a major complex was also built in Cummingsville. Two tanneries were also established in North Woburn during this period, west of Main Street. Also in North Woburn was established in 1853 the Woburn Chemical works (later Merrimac Chemical) by Robert Eaton, to supply the needs of the tanning industry.

Montvale in the meantime had developed other manufacturers. By 1841, a power canal nearly a mile in length had been built to supply the factory of J. Richardson, later occupied by the Woodrough saw factory. Another site, on the Aberjona and now occupied by Atlantic Gelatin, was the factory of the Eagle India Rubber Co., one of the myriad rubber factories which sprang up in the late 1830s rubber boom. But it was here in 1839 that Charles Goodyear is believed to have discovered the application of heat which was crucial to the vulcanization process. Off Washington Street were located two rope walks, and Joseph McCarthy operated a glass factory on Salem Street.

E. Architecture

Residential: Many highstyle Italianate houses were built toward the end of the period, along with a number of well-detailed Greek Revival houses and several Gothic Revival cottages, including one scattered group of three identical houses apparently constructed by the same builder. A few center entrance Greek Revival houses with Doric-columned verandas were built along Main Street, with simpler Greek Revival/Italianate-cottages and houses in working class neighborhoods just east of the town center. A number of ambitious, asymmetrical Italianate villas, a few with early mansard roofs (c. 1860), stand at Central Square and along Warren Street, with more modest suburban Italianate villas and houses in more isolated locations to the east of the Center off Montvale Avenue and Green Street. The above mentioned Gothic Revival cottages (with steeply pitched wall dormers flanking a central square roof dormer) survive, on Church Avenue, Prospect and Court Streets; two of these retain their carved bargeboards, finials, and other original detailing. Several well-preserved suburban stick style houses stand on Church Avenue. One highly significant building which does not survive is the Regency Greek Revival Whittemore House, a superlative example of that rare form of the Greek Revival which developed in the Middlesex County area in the 1840's.

Institutional: Several important institutional buildings were completed in this period, including the well-integrated Romanesque Revival 1st Congregational Church (c. 1855), floridly detailed Greek Revival/Italianate Unitarian Church (c. 1855), and brick Gothic Revival Catholic Church (c. 1870). Also constructed were a Greek Revival Town Hall (c. 1845) and a three story brick Italianate Lyceum Hall (c. 1855); both are demolished.

Commercial: Early views show that the town center had several three and four story brick commercial blocks and many smaller scale fram buildings. The Woburn Board of Trade Building, a four story brick Second Empire structure, the most imposing of these, does not survive, although some frame buildings may be extant, in altered form.

Industrial: Several four and five story frame tanneries were built in this period; none are known to survive.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Road and rail system intact from mid-19th century with extension of Woburn branch through N. Woburn (1885, now abandoned). Expansion of electric trolley routes to Woburn center by 1890's along Main Street from Winchester, Montvale Ave. from Stoneham. By early 1900's, additional lines from Lexington along Lexington St., from Reading on Campbell-Bow-Salem-Cedar Sts., from Burlington on Winn St. and to Wilmington on Main St. from North Woburn.

B. Population:

Population continued to rise at substantial though varying rates through 1915, interrupted (as yet inexplicably) by a slow period 1895-1905. By 1915, the 1870 figure had been doubled, reaching 16,410 in the former year. Irish immigration, still at bout 20% in 1885, had declined to about 13% 20 years later, with smaller numbers from Nova Scotia and English-speaking Canada.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Town center continued to expand as the primary commercial and civic focus with growth of modest suburban housing along Montvale, Lexington, and Main Sts. trolley lines. North Woburn remained an affluent suburban district and Montvale an industrial village with fringe activities along railroad Aberjona corridor to Mishawum.

D. Economic Base:

Production of leather remained dominant throughout the Late Industrial period. In 1884, 26 large tanneries employed over 1500 men, producing a product worth \$4.5 million. A significant change within the industry, however, occurred in the replacement of bark tanning by chrome tanning. One of the leaders in this development was Harry Thayer, who in 1901 originated chrome-tanned side leather and became the first tanner to market the product. Many factories converted to patent leather manufacture in this period. Along Webster St. in North Woburn by 1910 there were five patent leather factories (including Thayer's), all built within the preceding 10-15 years. (Virtually all had disappeared 20 years later.)

Several machine shops in this period produced equipment for the tanneries. The Bailey & Blendinger Mfg. Co. made machine knives for leather, textile, paper, and woodworking industries; the Woburn Machine Co. was established in 1899 to manufacture hide and leather working machines, developing a number of improvements subsequently adopted by the industry.

Despite the manufacturing base, Woburn growers marketed substantial quantities of agricultural products, and numerous greenhouses were built in this period.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Imposing highstyle Second Empire, Queen Anne, Shingle and Colonial Revival style houses, some of them undoubtedly architect-designed, were built on Warren Street and at the intersection of Mishawum and Main Streets. More modest suburban Queen Anne and Colonial Revival houses and vernacular Queen Anne workers' cottages, houses, and a few rowhouses were built east of the town center between Montvale and Fowle Streets and to the west of the enter along Arlington Road. A very few three deckers were constructed.

Institutional: The most significant institutional building constructed in the period is the Romanesque/Winn Memorial Library (H.H. Richardson, 1877), which, though not considered one of his best works, nonetheless established Richardson's facility for library planning (Hitchcock, p.171). The brick Victorian Gothic Wyman School on Main Street was built in this period along with a few churches, among them the Stick Style Episcopal Chapel and Italianate 1st Baptist Church.

Commercial: At least one brick Romanesque commercial block dating from the period still stands at the town center. Also completed were Renaissance Revival Bank building and a few Queen Anne and Colonial Revival storefronts.

Industrial: The Woburn Water Works, a one story stone structure, was built on Horn Pond. Gustavino Tile Works, "La Ceramica" built 1907 in brick and stone. 2-story brick Woburn Machine Company, 1899 Other industrial buildings built are utilitarian frame structures of the early 20th century.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Trolley routes abandoned during 1920's; improvement of local highways into autoroads through town center: Route 38 (Main Street) and Route 3 (Cambridge St.) running N/S, and original Route 128 as Lexington-Montvale Ave. running E/W.

B. Population:

The town's only real growth during this period occurred in the decade 1920-30. During the years of the depression and both World Wars, population growth was negligible. Since 1945, however, the figure has nearly doubled, most of the rise occurring in the 15 years 1950-65, when the town grew by almost 1100 people a year.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Woburn Center remained the civic and commercial focus continued with suburban expansion along Main St. toward Winchester (around Horn Pond) and in North Woburn. Secondary suburban development along Washington St. axis towards Montvale and Cambridge St. corridor at Lexington St. junction. Fringe industrial development expanded along Aberjona valley to North Woburn-Mishawum during mid-20th century, especially around Route 128 junction.

D. Economic Base:

In 1915, Woburn was still virtually a one-industry city. In the succeeding decade, however, this economic character began to change dramatically as different types of manufacturing were introduced. Though by 1926, more than half of the 53 manufacturing establishments were still connected with leather or shoemaking, there were also major factories for the production of ice cream, machine tools, mops, cordage, automobiles, paper boxes, gelatin, and fertilizer.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Only a few bungalows are known to have been built. Little construction took place and only a few modest Colonial Revival and Dutch Colonial cottages and houses are known.

Institutional: No significant structures were built.

Commercial: Several important structures were added to the downtown commercial center, including an intact, late 1930's Gorin's Department Store, faced with mirrored blue Carrara glass, and a well-preserved Colonial Beacon Gas Station of the late 1920's at Main and Salem Streets. Other commercial building consisted of simple one and two story blocks in brick and concrete along Main Street.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

Woburn's town inventory contains no industrial structures at all. Three tanneries still exist, though only one -- Beggs & Cobb (1884?) dates to the 19th century. The only operating tanner, the John J. Riley Co. on Salem Street, consists entirely of post-1910 frame buildings. Both the Woburn Machine Co. (201 Main Street, 1899) and Bailey & Blending Mfg. Co.

(20 Prospect at High, late 19th century) produced equipment for the tanneries. Two other machine shops and a saw factory date to the turn of the century or earlier.

Other extant structures include the 1872 water works on Horn Pond, a wood-frame factory for the manufacture of ladies' underwear, and a late 19th century carriage shop in Cummingsville. The factory and showroom of the R. Gustavino Co., known as "La Ceramica," still exists at 660 Main Street (1907).

Of these structures, probably both the 2-story stone and brick "La Ceramica" tile works and the 2-story brick Woburn Machine Co. merit National Register nominations.

XII. SOURCES

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- Cowley, Charles, "Experiments in Sericulture and in India-Rubber Manufacture," Old Residents' Historical Association Contributions 3 (Lowell, 1887), 243-251.