

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

WINTHROP

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.

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: March, 1981

Community: Winthrop

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Town occupies 1.63 square miles of a narrow peninsula between the Atlantic Ocean on the east, and Boston Harbor on the west. To the north, the peninsula is cut off from its parent town, Revere, by salt marshes and Short Beach Creek, as it is cut off from Hog's Island (now the northern extremity of East Boston) by Belle Isle Inlet. The peninsula was formed around the detrius of a string of drumlins between Deer Island, just beyond the town's southernmost extremity, and Winthrop Highlands to the north. The highest of these, Cottage Hill, forms a bluff 102 feet above the ocean. Between Point Shirley, tied to the town by the narrowest strip of land, and Winthrop Highlands stretches a beach slightly over 3 miles in length. Winthrop Centre lies to the west, a relatively low-lying area of somewhat over 500 acres, separated from the ocean coastline by a small tidal creek and marsh called Lewis Lake.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Originally called Pullin Point annexed to Boston 1634. Included within the town of Chelsea in 1739 and later North Chelsea (Revere) 1847. Became independent town of Winthrop 1852 with division from Revere along Short Beach Creek.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Seaside suburban community on periphery of Boston Harbor. Located within Massachusetts Bay as peninsula of connected islands surrounded by tidemarsch and ocean beaches with historical important native burial site near town center at Ingleside Park. Very early area of English settlement called Pullin Point with Winthrop estate farms of mid-17th century, including authentic First Period house in original condition. Peninsula remained isolated through 18th century with Colonial farmsteads and fishing station at Point Shirley. Some attempts to develop area as summer resort by early 19th century with surviving Federal period houses on Point Shirley, later site of Revere Copper works with apparent survival of mid-19th century worker's housing. Railroad connections to Boston during late 19th century prompt development of Winthrop Beach with Victorian period summer cottages at Ocean Spray and particularly on Cottage Hill. Town center develops on Winthrop peninsula with extensive affluent suburban area along Pleasant St. at Cottage and Court Parks with well-preserved examples of Mansard, Queen Anne and Colonial Revival houses. A similar area is also established at Winthrop Highlands with well formed Craftsman bungalows and Historic Revival suburban designs. Town center assumes urban characteristics by early 20th century with stucco apartment blocks and early period movie theatre, while civic buildings assume Neo-Colonial style. Secondary commercial focus emerged along

Main St. from East Boston while military fortifications were located around base of Winthrop Highlands. Present development presumes continued attraction of coastal beaches, although fringe pressure of Logan Airport and harbor pollution threaten suburban neighborhoods along Boston Harbor side, while problems of storm damage have affected stability of housing stock at Ocean Spray.

VI. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Extension of trail routes from mainland to Winthrop peninsula along coastal margins apparently followed Revere-Winthrop-Pauline Sts. to tideflats with alternate branch through Ingleside Park (Burial site) along Railroad St. Trail connection to Point Shirley around Lewis Lake appears to follow Shirley St. with lowtide crossing at Pullin Point to Deer Island.

B. Settlement Pattern:

An important period burial complex excavated during 1880's (19-SU-3); location was on site of now demolished railroad station in town center. Additional period burials uncovered further south near Pauline St. No period occupation sites known though their existence is highly probable, especially on the lee side of the Winthrop highlands.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

An access area for marine resources such as shellfish and fish. Also a prime area for trading activities between natives and Europeans.

D. Observations:

Part of the coastal resource area within the estuary of the Mystic and Charles rivers; apparently used primarily by those people living in the northern part of the Boston basin.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails remain as highways to Winthrop peninsula with primary connection to Mainland along Winthrop-Revere Sts. and branch to Pullin Point as Shirley St.

B. Population:

Earliest settlement 1635 by a herdsman, William Cheseborough. Fifteen allotments 1636-37, though probably

most of the 15 buildings built by 1640 were held by non-residents.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Early division of landgrants on Winthrop peninsula during 1630s with formation of individual estate farms along Revere-Winthrop Sts. by mid-17th century.

D. Economic Base:

Land largely used for grazing and farm products.

E. Architecture:

Residential: The Deane Winthrop House on School Street is probably the oldest surviving house in the Boston study unit. Traditionally held to be the house built by Captain William Pierce in 1637, the house was later purchased by Deane Winthrop, the son of Governor John Winthrop. Corroboration of the extremely early First Period date seems likely, thus placing the Winthrop House in a league with the Fairbanks House (1636); the survival of the Winthrop House must be considered extremely rare and fortuitous, especially as it is located so close to metropolitan Boston. At present a center chimney structure, the house was probably an end chimney structure as originally built; also added is the rear lean-to.

V. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highways remain from 17th century with Revere St. connections to Chelsea meeting house around Winthrop Highlands.

B. Population:

By 1690, Pullen Point entirely owned by Bill family and Deane Winthrop. Only four buildings identified at that time. Town experienced population boom in 1750s with Goldthwait fishery at Point Shirley. Fifty new buildings constructed for fishery and workers. By 1760, town had population of 300. Failure of fishery and smallpox epidemic reduced population to two families by 1780.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Estate farms maintained on Winthrop peninsula with fishing station established at Point Shirley by mid-18th century.

D. Economic Base:

Exclusively a farming community engaged in raising beef and dairy cattle and sending butter and cheese to Boston markets. Abundant supplies of salt marsh hay readily purchased by other towns, and kelp sold as fertilizer.

In the early 1750s, Boston merchants, led by Thomas Goldthwait, decided to establish an extensive fishery at what is now Point Shirley. The company "built a church, a store, a warehouse, wharves, and dwellings for its employees on an ambitious scale" (Clark), and invited Governor Shirley, in whose honor the point was subsequently named, to inaugurate the company's endeavor. The ensuing publicity gained for Winthrop its first summer colony. The fishery, however, proved a failure and closed in 1763. A smallpox epidemic forced out the remaining new residents, and by 1780, the town had been reduced to two families.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Only two houses are known to survive from the Colonial period in Winthrop. These are the summer house of John Hancock, a hip roofed houses (1756) said to be of brick, though it is now aluminum sided, and the Reed House (1753) also a hip roofed house, with end chimneys.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Little improvement of roads from 18th century with main axis along Winthrop-Revere Sts. to mainland and Shirley St. extention to Pullin Point.

B. Population:

Population reached 31 families in 1840. Of these 156 people, Clark noted, 142 were descendants in one way or another of the 17th century landholder James Bill.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Winthrop peninsula remains in private farmsteads through early 19th century. Point Shirley developed as summer estate with ferry service to Boston.

D. Economic Base:

Predominantly agricultural economy. In 1803, Russell Sturgis purchased land at Point Shirley to construct an extensive saltworks along the lines of others in operation then along the south shore. This operation appears to have flourished for about 20-25 years.

E. Architecture:

Residential: A few Federal period houses are known, most of these vernacular twin rear wall chimney examples along Main Street and at the town center with one example on Washington Street. The record does not indicate that any highstyle Federal houses were ever constructed at Winthrop but the advantages of the site close to Boston (and the location of the Hancock house there) suggest that some Bostonians may have built countryhouses of some pretention.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Roads remain from early 19th century with bridge connections to East Boston at Main St. (1835) and stage lines to Point Shirley by 1850.

B. Population:

156 people by 1840. By 1855, three years after incorporation of the town, figure had risen to 407, though the vast majority were summer residents. Limited growth throughout period, possibly associated with Revere smelter, whose closing in 1869 may have induced a small decline between the 1865 and '70 figures. Of the population in 1865, about 20% were Irish born.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Increasing development of Winthrop peninsula as summer resort during mid-19th century and formation of local town center on Winthrop St. around school house. Point Shirley aquired by Revere Copper creating small industrial village around waterfront.

D. Economic Base:

Winthrop's principal industrial period. In 1844, the Revere Copper Co., which operated a rolling mill in Canton, found in Point Shirley an ideal location for a smelter where noxious fumes would be readily dissipated. The furnaces, of a design then current in Europe, were among the first to be erected in the U.S. Here for about 25 years, South American ore (principally from Chile) was processed into ingots. In 1865, spurred by war demands, the company employed 60 men and produced copper worth \$400,000. The discovery of copper deposits in Michigan coupled with duty on imported ore, gradually made operation of the plant unprofitable, however, and it closed in 1869.

Simultaneously, the Winthrop Coal Oil Co. produced kerosene and naphtha worth \$110,000 in a plant located on the easterly side of Pleasant St. One tannery was in operation employing 6 hands and producing \$25,000 worth of hides in 1865. And three men, Henry Fay, Thomas Belcher, and Uriah Butland, manufactured "torpedoes" worth \$4,275 of paper and fabric-wrapped bundles of gravel and explosive, detonated by a percussion cap.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Very little construction took place in Winthrop until the end of the Early Industrial Period; the earliest structures are suburban Italianate houses at the town center and along Main Street. Very few Greek Revival houses or cottages survive and apparently few were built although some double cottages at Point Shirley date from the period and are probably worker's housing associated with the Revere Copper Works, in operation on Point Shirley from 1844-1869.

Institutional: In 1852, when it was incorporated, Winthrop's first Town Hall was built, a Greek Revival/Italianate structure, since demolished.

Commercial: Among the commercial structures constructed in the period were two hotels: Taft's Hotel on Point Shirley, a large, two-story Greek Revival building with a one story portico (1830) and the Bartlett House (1850) a highstyle Italianate villa design, later modified with Colonial Revival details and, in 1920, demolished; Taft's was well-known in 19th century Boston for its exotic and extensive menu of game birds and seafood. The only other commercial structure known is a store on South Main Street, established c. 1850.

Industrial: While the Revere Copper Works operated on Point Shirley from 1844-1869, no structures are known extant, with the possible exception of a few worker's cottages (see above).

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Extensive railroad connections to beachfront from East Boston and Revere with several transient operations. Horse-car route from East Boston (1871) apparently followed in circuit around Main-Pleasant-Winthrop-Revere-Shirley St. to Winthrop Head (abandoned 1876). Narrow gauge railroad from Revere to Point Shirley (1877) replaced by standard gauge route along beachfront (1883) to Ocean Spray and Point Shirley (abandoned 1885) although route location is uncertain. Steam railroad loop around town center and Lewis Lake (1888) from East Boston with depots at Winthrop Center and Winthrop Beach

(now abandoned with roadbed intact as Railroad Ave). Local trolley line from Crystal Cove to Point Shirley (1910) with route apparently on Shirley St.

B. Population:

Winthrop's real growth dates to this period, stimulated by the land companies and the steam railroads, which entered the town in the 1870s and '80s. Between 1870 and 1890, the population doubled each decade; it nearly tripled between 1890 and 1900, and doubled again 1900-1915. Much of the new population was affluent, and the number of first-generation immigrants in 1885 was sharply down. As it began to rise again by 1905, most gave their place of birth as Nova Scotia. By 1915, the total population had reached 12,785, nearly 24 times the 1870 figure.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Rapid development of area with railroad access during late 19th century from Revere and East Boston. Affluent residential district forms along Pleasant St. from town center with subdivision of Cottage and Court Parks by early 20th century. Winthrop Highlands and Cottage Hill developed as summer resort: communities with modest seaside cottages along Winthrop Beach at Ocean Spray and Point Shirley. Town center remains on Winthrop Street with civic and commercial activities shifted to railroad depot on Pauline Street.

D. Economic Base:

Winthrop's industry in this period was in railroads and real estate. Ocean Spray, developed by Samuel Ingalls 1875-6 was one of the first developments, followed by Cottage Hill (originally "Great Head") 1882, and Point Shirley, 1883. Town sewer completed in 1889, supplemented after 1890 by North Metropolitan Sewer, with pumping station on Deer Island. Two harbor defense forts, Fort Banks and Fort Heath, constructed 1891. By the 1890s, Winthrop's summer home residents were becoming year-round residents, and by 1910, the present division of eight neighborhoods had been fairly well defined.

E. Architecture:

Residential: The majority of Winthrop's residential construction dates from this period with neighborhoods of well-detailed year-round suburban Queen Anne, Shingle Style and Colonial Revival houses around the town center and more modest summer cottages and bungalows and a few large late 19th-century hotels along Winthrop Beach, at Cottage Hill and at Point Shirley. Significant concentrations of high-style Stick, Shingle, Queen Anne, Colonial Revival, and Craftsman houses, many of them probably architect designed, stand along and southwest of Pleasant Street at Cottage and Court Parks. A few Second Empire houses, built early in the period stand along Pleasant Street and at the town center but most commonly the mansard roof was used for small beach cottages

such as those located on the short sidestreets west of Winthrop Shore Drive. Winthrop Highlands and Court Park developed after the turn of the century with many simple Craftsman-derived single family houses and cottages at Winthrop Highlands and larger and more ambitious Colonial Revival and Craftsman houses at Court Park. The most notable of these is a well-detailed stuccoed bungalow on Cliff Street at Winthrop Highlands apparently inspired by the work of Frank Lloyd Wright. Also built in the period were a few apartment blocks with examples of the Mission and Colonial Revival styles, and several Queen Anne beach hotels. Almost all beachfront properties, exposed to harsh weathering, have been resided, although most retain their original detailing at the roofline.

Institutional: Most of Winthrop's institutional buildings were built in this period with many notable examples by a local architect, Willard Bacon. Bacon completed designs for the Frost Library (1898-1899), the High School (1896: now Center School), the Central Fire Station, a second High School (1907), and the Pauline Street Grammar School (1908); most of these are conservative Colonial, Renaissance, or Tudor Revival designs in brick. Also built in the period were several churches including the shingled Gothic Revival 1st Baptist Church (c. 1910).

Commercial: A few modest commercial structures were built at the town center with one notable example, the Kincade Theatre (1914, Penn Varney). Several yacht clubs were also built including the Shingle Style Winthrop Yacht Club (1904; Willard Bacon).

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Abandonment of railroad and trolley routes by mid-20th century and improvement of local roads as autohighways with construction of Winthrop Shore Drive from Revere to Winthrop Head by 1930's.

B. Population:

Population growth slowed after about 1920, growing by little more than 100 people a year between 1920 and 1935, until it reached its peak in the latter year of 17,001, while the succeeding five years witnessed a small decline. The population fluctuated after World War II, reaching a peak of 20,398 in 1965.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Continued expansion of suburban residential development around Winthrop peninsula with affluent district around Cottage and Court Parks seashore and Winthrop Highlands

and modest tract housing at Ocean Spray and Point Shirley. Commercial and civic center remained along Winthrop Street with secondary centers at Main-Revere Sts. and Washington Avenue-Shirley St. at Crystal Cove. Military reservations established at base of Winthrop Highlands with Fort Banks and Fort Heath by mid-20th century. Extensive portion of tideflats filled for Logan Airport from East Boston.

D. Economic Base:

Entirely residential community. End of the period was marked dramatically by the abandonment in 1940 of the "Narrow Gauge," the line of the Boston, Revere Beach, and Lynn Railroad which linked the town with East Boston and Lynn.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Residential development in neighborhoods at Winthrop Highlands, Point Shirley, and Court Park was for the most part completed in this period. Simple hip-roofed bungalows and cottages filled in Point Shirley while at Winthrop Highlands more substantial Craftsman and Colonial Revival suburban houses for year-round residents continued to be built. Court Park and the area south of Pleasant St. remained highstyle neighborhoods for Boston commuters and many well-detailed and imposing houses in Tudor and Georgian Revival design were constructed; brick and stucco were favored materials and many houses have fancifully-patterned masonry and half-timbered facades.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

Winthrop's survey includes about a half dozen 18th and early 19th century houses in the town: future survey efforts should pay particular attention to the late 19th century suburban development of Cottage and Court Parks and of Winthrop Highlands. Potential districts of highstyle architecture exist in both of the first two areas with significant isolated examples and clusters of workers' and suburban houses at Winthrop Highlands. Further research should identify any structures surviving from the Revere Copper Works at Point Shirley. The Deane Winthrop House demands further research and recognition including NR listing.

XII. SOURCES

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