

# MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

## CHESTERFIELD

Report Date: 1982

Associated Regional Report: Connecticut Valley

**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: October 1982

COMMUNITY: Chesterfield

### I. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Chesterfield is a rural recreational hill town on a secondary corridor between Northampton and Pittsfield. Located within the Berkshire highlands along the upper Westfield River basin, potential native sites are likely around the West Chesterfield Gorge and Dead Branch valley. It was settled as township lands during the Colonial Period; mid-18th century agricultural landscape is preserved on Ireland Street and South Street, with some late period houses intact.

The town center was established at Chesterfield village after the Revolution with well preserved Federal Period houses along Main Road (Route 143) and landmark civic buildings of later Greek Revival style.

Upland agriculture was maintained along available meadows with several early 19th century farmsteads remaining active along Bryant and South Streets, including well preserved period cottages along Sugar Hill-Chesterfield Roads. There was development of local craft villages at Bisbee Mills and West Chesterfield with period houses intact, including notable Early Industrial sawmills along Route 143, and the remains of a period bridge over Westfield Gore.

Lumbering continued as an economic activity through the early 20th century in the western hills, and there was dairy farming on the uplands now evident by several abandoned silos. Goshen Center remained as the civic focus with resort hotels (no longer standing) and a concrete block Grange Hall.

Present development is most evident along the Route 143 axis as there was gradual suburban expansion on upland vistas eroding the agricultural landscape. Chesterfield Center retains authentic historic character as a hill town while the integrity of West Chesterfield appears threatened by Route 143 traffic and recreational pressure around Westfield Gorge.

### II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Chesterfield was originally granted as Narragansett Township Number 4 and surveyed for lot division in 1739, with its eastern boundary at Hatfield Addition (Williamsburg) and its southeast boundary with Northampton Long Division (Westhampton). Established initially as the New Hingham plantation by 1760, it was incorporated as the town of Chesterfield in 1762. The western boundary was defined at Township Number 3 (Worthington), the northern boundary at township Number 5 (Cummington), and the southwest line with Murryfield (Huntington) by 1779. The northeast district was formed as the town of Goshen in 1781 with boundary adjustments to 1789, and the southwest section along North Branch of the Manhan River was annexed from Norwich (Huntington) in 1794.

### III. TOPOGRAPHY

Chesterfield is dominated by a complex of uplands that are the southern extension of the Green Mountains of Vermont. They generally range between 1100 and 1400 feet in elevation. Prominent points include Oak Hill (1446 feet), Bagg Ledges (1445 feet), Ram Hill (1517 feet), Shaw Ledges (1512 feet)

and Castle Hill (1301 feet). The present village of Chesterfield is situated on one of the town's higher elevations (1427 feet). These uplands are broken by the Westfield River and several minor tributaries. The Westfield enters from Cummington and extends the length of Chesterfield, eventually flowing into the Connecticut River in West Springfield. The eastern bank of the Westfield River, slightly south of its junction with Ireland Street, is the location of the West Chesterfield Gorge, an impressive natural formation. The northern portion of the river was the site of the vast majority of the town's 19th and early 20th century mill industries. Chesterfield lacks natural freshwater bodies. Both Damon and Stout ponds were created with the development of local industrial operations.

#### IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

##### A. Transportation Routes:

There was a secondary corridor across the Berkshire highlands with connections to the Westfield River and the Connecticut Valley. The primary east-west trail apparently followed from upper Mill River (Williamsburg) to West Chesterfield Gorge as Meadow-State Roads, with presumed forway at Dead Branch (Bisbee Mills). A connecting north-south trail is conjectured to Scout Pond and possibly Fisk Meadow. The main trail is presumed to follow west from Chesterfield Center around Bagg Ledges along the axis of Main Road (Route 143) to a likely crossing of the Westfield River above the Gorge, possibly along the Old Pontoosuc Road. Other trail routes in the area remain unclear with likely candidates along the Westfield River as the north-south connector to the Gorge crossing.

##### B. Settlement Patterns:

There were no reported Contact Period sites. Period settlement was probably light due to the area's moderate to rugged terrain. Period sites were most likely restricted to short-term fishing and hunting camps established throughout the town's uplands and near local waterways, such as the Westfield River. Two possible riverine locations are immediately south of the junction of the Westfield River and Partridge Road, reputed site of the "last Pequot village" (MHC prehistoric site file - Chesterfield) and the river's southern floodplain. The gradually sloping and prominent uplands of southeastern Chesterfield are likely the site of a native upland encampment.

##### C. Subsistence Base:

There was likely little or no native horticulture undertaken locally. Fishing probably took place throughout Chesterfield on local waterways, particularly the Westfield River. The area's moderate to rugged terrain provided an excellent habitat for wild game such as fowl, wolf, bear, deer, moose, etc., animals traditionally sought by native hunters.

##### D. Observations:

Chesterfield was part of the peripheral upland area utilized by the natives of the study unit's settlement core situated along the Connecticut River. These uplands were probably utilized by either the Pucumtucks centered in present Deerfield or the Norotucks of Northampton/Hadley. The greatest possibility of extant period sites would be the uplands of southeastern Chesterfield, most

notably Bofa Hill and Kidd's Lookout, and the Westfield River valley, particularly the "Pequot village" site and the southernmost portion of the valley.

#### V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

##### A. Transportation Routes:

The primary east-west route apparently remained as Pontoosuc Path from Northampton to Westfield River Gorge along the axis of Route 143.

##### B. Population:

Chesterfield probably continued to be occupied by small bands of natives pursuing wild game and fish.

Colonial occupation did not take place until the mid 18th century.

##### C. Settlement Patterns:

The native settlement patterns most likely remained similar to those suggested for the Contact Period.

##### D. Economic Base:

Native subsistence patterns probably remained essentially the same as those suggested for the preceding period.

Chesterfield's rugged terrain and distance from the study unit's period colonial settlement's limited colonial use to occasional hunting and fishing forays.

##### E. Observations:

Chesterfield remained primarily a peripheral resource area for the unit's Connecticut River native population. Serious colonial interest in this and the remainder of the study unit's upland periphery did not occur until the early-mid 18th century when the region's native population had been subdued and prime riverine locations had begun dwindling.

#### VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

##### A. Transportation Routes:

The plat of Narragansett township Number 4 (1739) established a division grid with highways laid out after the incorporation of Chesterfield in 1762. North-south division roads included Ireland Street (1763), North-south Street, Bryant, Sugar hill, and Mount Roads, with east-west highways Old Chesterfield and Munson-Roberts Roads. Location of the first meetinghouse at Utleys Corners (1768) established radial connectors as Willicott-North Roads, Pynchon and Smith-Damon Roads from the town center. There was significant improvement of primary east-west highways as Pontoosuc Road (1760) along Meadow-State and Main Roads (Route 143) with a bridge across Westfield Gorge (1769) from old River Hill Road (Sylvester I. 1879, p. 495).

## B. Population:

Small bands of Connecticut River natives displaced during King Philip's War and the French and Indian wars of the late 17th and 18th centuries may have occupied the Chesterfield area.

In 1765, the Colonial settlement consisted of only 30 houses, 30 families, and 161 individuals. This figure was the lowest for any of the Hampshire County towns. By 1776, the town is reputed to have undergone nearly a tenfold increase to a population of 1092 residents (Gay 1887:203). The largest number of settlers emigrated from southeastern and Cape towns such as Scituate, Pembroke, Bridgewater, and Marblehead in addition to Northampton. A smaller proportion came from the communities of Boston, Cohasset, Hingham, Plymouth, Easton, Dudley, and Brookfield. The vast majority of the local residents were Congregationalists. However, as early as the late 1760s several settlers attended a Baptist church in Ashfield.

## C. Settlement Patterns:

Period colonial settlement was relatively dispersed with homes established at several locations. Despite the fact that Chesterfield was laid out in 1739 and granted to King Philips and King William war veterans in 1740, initial settlement of the town did not occur until ca. 1755-56. At this time, Gideon Bisbee lived in the area during the weekdays while lumbering in local woodlands. The outbreak of Anglo-Indian fighting forced him to abandon Chesterfield for his Northampton home. The first permanent settlement commenced in the early 1760s with the construction of several homes along Ireland Street. By the late 1760s, there was evidence of a settlement shift to the east, particularly Damo Pond Road/South Street and Smith Road, the site of the community's first meetinghouse (ca. 1768). Additional late period homes were erected on the lower portion of Bryant Road, Meadow and Numson Roads, the lower portion of Sugar Hill Road, and in the vicinity of Damon Pond.

## D. Economic Base:

Local residents focused on agriculture, primarily grazing. Crops such as hay, rye, and corn were sent east to Northampton and Boston. The settlement had a modest industrial component: Joseph Burrell established a grist and sawmill complex at the southern end of Damon Pond in the early 1760s. A sawmill was built at the southern outlet of Scout Pond prior to 1773. A pre-1773 sawmill was constructed on Dead Branch at Bisbee Mill. A possible late 18th century tannery was built on the site of "H. B. Smith and Sons Mill" (Gay 1887:217). Benjamin Tupper opened the first local tavern in 1764.

## E. Architecture:

Only two structures of the Colonial Period are known to survive in Chesterfield. These are a center chimney cottage on Buck Road, dated 1768, and the 1768 ell of the Jonathan Anderson House (1820). It is possible to speculate that the town's first houses were either one or two room plan Cape Cod cottages of one or one-and-a-half stories in height. Such speculation is based on the settlers' peripheral Colonial locational. The first meetinghouse of the Chesterfield society (organized 1764) was constructed in 1768. Four school districts were established in 1769 and each was required to build a schoolhouse. At least one tavern (Benjamin Tupper, 1764) operated in the period.

## F. Observations:

Chesterfield served as an upland support community for the river town of Northampton. A number of the original township tract lines survive as local streets and include Ireland and South Streets. There is excellent potential for extant archaeological remains of period settlement throughout the town. It is likely considerable evidence of Chesterfield's settlement node and its first two mill operations still survive.

## VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

### A. Transportation Routes:

Relocation of the meetinghouse to Chesterfield Center in 1791 created a radial highway network along the axis of Main-Old Chesterfield and North-south Roads. There was continued improvement of east-west corridor with the Third Massachusetts Turnpike in 1797 along Meadow-Stage-Main Roads (Route 143) with relocation of the Westfield River crossing from Old River Hill Road to West Chesterfield in 1827 along Route 143 (Sylvester 1897, I: p. 496). Connecting highways from West Chesterfield included Cummington and Partridge Roads along Westfield River and Tower Brook.

### B. Population:

Chesterfield's population in 1790-1830 rose 19.6%, about average for many of the hill towns, although well below the 60.7% county average. Its greatest growth occurred in the decade 1790-1800, however, and in 1820, at a peak of 1,447, the town stopped growing altogether, beginning a gradual decline that lasted 150 years. In 1830 the population stood at 1,416.

### C. Settlement Patterns:

The meetinghouse relocated from Utleys Corners (Smith-North Roads) south to Chesterfield Center (1791), establishing the civic focus along the axis of North-south Roads with Main Road (Route 143). A local mill village developed at West Chesterfield above the Westfield River gorge and at Bisbee Mill on Dead Branch and Westfield River valleys.

### D. Economic Base:

Chesterfield supported a largely agricultural economy, although cloth dressing mills were established by 1790 at High Bridge and later on Dead Branch. The Chesterfield Cotton Mfg. (William S. Brooks, Agent) was reported in the 1822 directory of U.S. manufacturers, but no other evidence of this mill was discovered.

Probably during the Embargo years, the raising of Merino sheep commenced in Chesterfield. By 1837, the Merino wool clip amounted to 15,000 lbs. - 14% of the county total in Merino wool, giving the town second rank in its production after Worthington. (Saxony wool, introduced in the 1820s, was even with neighboring Middlefield producing most.) Much of the wool was probably sent to mills in Cummington or Williamsburg.

Two tanneries were begun in the 1820s. Eight to ten sawmills were also in operation with the beginning of specialization in wooden implements.

## E. Architecture:

Residential: At least two dozen Federal houses and cottages survive in Chesterfield. Almost all of these are center chimney plan structures, with cottages predominating. By the end of the period, larger houses with up-to-date center hall plans had been built in the town, most of them at the town center. For the early years of the period, however, center chimney cottages, such as the Luce House (1775), the Baker House (1796), and Sugar Hill Farm (1792), were the rule. The most outstanding house of the period is the Starkweather-Edwards House (1822), a hip roofed house with double interior chimneys and an elaborate entrance surround with basket-arched fanlight and sidelights. Other stylish center hallhouses with hip roofs included the Jonathan Anderson House (1820) and the Bryant-Benzian House (ca. 1820); both of these houses are notable for their use of town rearwall chimneys. Period houses are dispersed throughout the town with examples noted on Main, Stage, and Meadow Roads. and on South and Ireland Streets..

Institutional: In 1791, the first meetinghouse was taken down and the timbers used to build a replacement at the present town center site; in 1814-15, the structure underwent repairs. Of special note was the presence in the period of two Baptist societies. Baptists, a prominent force in southeastern Mass., from which the town's settlers had emigrated, had been present in Chesterfield from the 1760s. They did not formally organize, however, until ca. 1790 when a meetinghouse was built on Partridge Road. In 1818, a second Baptist society (later Freewill Baptists) replaced their meetinghouse in 1825, using the timbers of the first structure. Also at that time, they move to the town center. Both societies were extinct by the 1850s.

Commercial: Two commercial buildings of note have survived in Chesterfield. These are the Damon Tavern (1797) on Meadow Road and a law office (ca. 1810?) on Main Road at the town center. The Damon Tavern is a well detailed and well preserved center chimney house with corner pilasters with capitals and an entrance surround with pediment. The presumed law office is a small one-story, hip roofed building, two bays wide with a center entrance.

## VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

### A. Transportation Routes:

The primary east-west corridor remained as Main Road (Route 143) with and apparent extension east to Williamsburg around Dead Swamp as Route 143. No railroads were projected or constructed through the area.

### B. Population:

Like the majority of towns in the county, Chesterfield's population continued to decline. Between 1830 and 1870 the town lost 42% of its population with the greatest loss (20%) occurring in the single decade 1830-40).

In 1855, Chesterfield had 36 foreign-born residents -- 3.7% of its population and one of the smallest percentages of any town in the county. This figure rivaled the neighboring hill towns: Cummington (3.6%), Worthington (3.1%), Plainfield and Goshen (each 1.9%). Thirty-two of the 36 immigrants were from Ireland.

### C. Settlement Patterns:

The civic focus remained at Chesterfield Center with a street village extended along North-south Roads. Local industrial activity continued at West Chesterfield and Bisbee Mills with modest expansion of workers' housing. Dairy farming was maintained on the upland meadows with lumbering on Westfield and Dead Branch Rivers.

### D. Economic Base:

Diversification and expansion of Chesterfield's limited industrial base occurred with the development of a factory village at West Chesterfield, probably initiated by the extensive sawmill and handle shop begun by William Williamson, 1839 (site of Healy's Mills). In 1846, Lyman Litchfield and Duandler Moore built an iron foundry, turning out Green Mountain Cook Stoves, plows, cultivators, and the like. A second foundry in West Chesterfield was begun by Patrick Bryant, in addition to machine and woodworking shops, cider mills, and distillery. Bryant is said to have initiated here the business of making sieve hoops (200th Anniversary, p.34), a business which lasted well into the 20th century.

As late as 1855, the two tanneries (one operated by Bryant) represented the town's chief industries in terms of product value. By 1865, however, woodworking shops, like Williamson's or Bryant's, were Chesterfield's major manufacturers, producing a variety of wooden products (valued at \$10,000). By 1865 there were also three small scythe stone makers, a business the town apparently inherited from Huntington immediately to the south, where the industry had begun in the Federal Period.

Several hamlets developed around small mill clusters -- at Bisbee's Mills, at Witherill's Basket factory and chair shop (Witherill had patented an invalid chair). Baskets were another product also common to Huntington, probably made of the native ash. Charles Higgins had a shop at West Chesterfield.

### E. Architecture:

Residential: At least two dozen houses and cottages of the Early Industrial period have survived in Chesterfield. These include almost equal numbers of Greek Revival and Italianate style structures. In general, plan types are conservative, with center chimney plans used into the 1840s, especially for cottages. The sidehall plan was introduced into the 1850s and was used primarily for Italianate houses and cottages. Comparatively few houses with five-bay, center entrance, center hall plans were built in the town. One of the finest is the Bancroft House (1860), with bracketed eaves, quoins and an enclosed entrance porch. Also of note is the presence of several unusual Greek revival cottages on Ireland Street. These combine Greek Revival gable front entrance and orientation with the end gable fenestration of Federal Cape Cod cottages, and represent a unique local adaptation. Similar cottages were built off Ireland Street in South Worthington and probably indicate the work of a local builder.

Institutional: The present Congregational Church, a two and-a-half story Greek Revival building with a two-story porch and square belfry tower, was built in 1835. Also built in the period was the Town Hall, originally constructed for the Methodist Church in 1845. The church of the Methodists (who organized in 1843), a two-story Greek Revival/Italianate structure with a



three-bay, center entrance facade with pilaster, a Tuscan portico in antis and roundhead windows, was sold to the town in 1858. Since that date, the building has been used as the Town Hall. The only other extant institutional building of the period is the Ireland Street School (ca. 1850), a three-by-two bay, one-and-a-half story, side entered frame building.

Industrial: The Stevensville Grist Mill (1858), a two-story frame building near West Chesterfield, is the only extant industrial building known.

## IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

### A. Transportation Routes:

The local highway system remained focused around Chesterfield Center along the primary east-west axis of Route 143 to West Chesterfield. No trolley lines were projected or constructed.

### B. Population:

Like the majority of towns in the county, Chesterfield's population continued to decline. Between 1870 and 1915 the town lost 252 residents - 31% of its 1870 population. The foreign-born population took on small numbers from Canada by 1880. In 1815 twenty Poles made up nearly 40% of the immigrants, now rising to 9.1% of the population that year.

### C. Settlement Patterns:

Chesterfield Center was maintained as the civic focus along Main Road (Route 143) with local industrial villages at West Chesterfield and Bisbee Mills. Agriculture continued on highland farms along Ireland Street and Bryant Road.

### D. Economic Base:

West Chesterfield appears to have kept its two major industries. Sieve and banjo hoops continued to be produced by the Smith family and, after 1901, by Frank Stanton. S.A. Healy's Sons in 1912 were said to be the only firm doing an extensive business in saw and plane handles in the country, employing 25 hands to produce a product worth \$18,000. Other woodworking shops produced supplies for the textile mills of larger communities: Spencer and Reed (1877) at the Old Litchfield site, made picker sticks, hat racks and hand rakes; Horace Taylor, as long as the silk mills operated in Florence and Leeds, made spools and bobbins at the mouth of the Dead Branch. H.K. Weeks also had a small cutlery works on the Dead Branch.

But by the 1890s, the largest product values were those from the dairy, hayfield, and woods. This re-emerging agricultural economy developed alongside the growing trade from summer residents.

### E. Architecture:

Residential: After a modest burst of activity early in the period, construction in the town leveled off in the 1880s and 90s. A few Gothic Revival, mansard and Stick Style houses and cottages were built in the 1870s, among them the modest Gothic Revival Bryant-Swenson House (1873) and the Methodist Parsonage (1848; mansard added ca. 1875). Most of the other period houses are small one and two story sidehall plan Queen Anne cottages, examples

of which were observed along Main Road and on South Street. An exception in the gambrel roofed Colonial Revival summer cottage built by Holyoke resident William Whiting in 1892.

Institutional: The only institutional building known for the period is the Grange Hall (19114), a one-story, center entrance vernacular building sided with pressed metal.

Commercial: Several commercial buildings of the period survive, including the Post Office and Baker Store (1892), a two-story Italianate building on South Street with three facade bays and a center entrance, and a store at West Chesterfield. Also known is a tenement hotel (ca. 1895) on Main Road.

## X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

### A. Transportation Routes:

There was improvement of the primary east-west corridor as auto highway Route 143 through Chesterfield Center with a connecting road from West Chesterfield to Cummington.

### B. Population:

The town's population recorded a net loss of 137 residents during the period, although small gains were made in the early 1920s and 30s. By 1940 the population stood at 422. The town's nadir was not reached until 1945, at pop. 375.

### C. Settlement Patterns:

The civic focus remained at Chesterfield Center with local mill villages at West Chesterfield and Bisbee. Dairy farming continued on the upland hills with tourist activity in Chesterfield Gorge along Route 143 (West Chesterfield).

### D. Economic Base:

No new industries were identified, although Benjamin Higgins moved his basket shop in 1928 from West Chesterfield closer to the center of town.

### E. Architecture:

With the exception of some summer cottages built at Damon Pond in the 1920s, very little construction took place in the Early Modern Period. At the town center, the Dunham Library (1921) and the Davenport School (ca. 1930) were constructed. The library is a hip roofed one-story Colonial Revival building with a gabled entrance. The Davenport School, a one-and-a-half story frame building with a gable roof, features a center entrance with a Connecticut Valley broken scroll pediment.

## XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

General: Chesterfield's inventory records nearly all pre-1930 buildings of significance in the town's two primary villages, Chesterfield Center and West Chesterfield; also recorded are outstanding pre-1850 houses located on outlying roads. Inventory forms included particularly well documented

statements of historical significance. With minor exceptions, such as the Davenport School (ca. 1930) and Grange Hall (1914), the local inventory is complete.

## XII. SOURCES

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