

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

MIDDLEFIELD

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: MIDDLEFIELD

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Middlefield is situated in the eastern foothills of the Green Mountains of Vermont. Local terrain consists of moderate uplands that are some of the highest in the Connecticut River Valley study unit. Elevations usually range between 1100 feet and 1700 feet. Several points reach over 1900 feet. The highest elevation is Robbins Hill (2000 feet) located in northern Middlefield in the Peru State Forest. Additional prominent points include Pelton Hill (1980 feet) southeast of Robbins Hill, Bear Mountain (1609 feet) west of the Middle Branch of the Westfield River, Johnnycake Hill (1672 feet) in south-central Middlefield and West Hill (1721 feet) west of and overlooking Factory Brook. These uplands are broken by Coles Brook, Factory Brook, Glendale Brook and several smaller waterways. They flow in a southeasterly direction and drain into the Westfield River which delineates Middlefield southern border. The Middle Branch of the Westfield defines the town's southwestern boundary. Small tracts of marshland are scattered about the town. Middlefield's only body of freshwater is a small pond that empties into Coles Brook.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Incorporated in 1783 from several adjacent towns with original section along Factory Brook as Preston's Grant of c.1770. Northeast district annexed from Worthington (1768) with boundary along Middle Branch of Westfield River. Southeast section annexed from Chester (1765) with boundary along Hampden County line. Southwest section annexed from Becket (1765) with boundary along West Branch of Westfield River. Western district annexed from Washington (1771) with boundary at Berkshire County line. Northwest section annexed from Peru (1771) with segment of original township line (1762) intact at Peru State Forest.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Rural recreational hill town isolated on secondary corridor between Pittsfield and Westfield. Located in Berkshire uplands with native site potential suspected along Westfield River branches. Settled before Revolution from adjacent towns with highland farming along Main Road axis around Middlefield Center including some well preserved early Federal houses and apparent frame of original meetinghouse. Agriculture continued as primary activity through 19th century with development of specialized cattle breeding, including Highland fair grounds at town center with Victorian houses. Secondary mill village formed along Factory Brook in Brush Hollow with some remaining workers cottages after late 19th century floods. Early Industrial

railroad corridor opened along Westfield River gorge as Boston and Albany mainline with several original stone arch bridges intact and Greek Revival depot village at Bancroft. Gradual development of recreational potential during early 20th century with period bungalows and log cabins along West Hill Road. Present growth is evident as suburban housing on attractive vistas, while Middlefield Center retains authentic village character as hill town.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Intermediate highland corridor from Westfield River through Berkshires. Primary north-south trail reported as Main Road along upland plateau with connecting trail to Middle Branch of Westfield along Glendale Brook as Wright Road (Smith, 1924, Trails map). Other suspected routes appear to have followed Factory Brook north-south to Westfield River and upper Glendale Brook through Peru State Forest (Ibid.)

B. Settlement Patterns:

There were no reported period sites. The area's rugged terrain and absence of large bodies of freshwater would have discouraged extensive native settlement. Period sites would most likely have been limited to short-term fishing and hunting encampments. Fishing sites may have been established along the Middle and West Branches of the Westfield River, Factory Brook, particularly its middle portion, and Glendale Falls. Hunting camps were most apt to be located on upland sites such as West Hill. Additional sites may have been established further north in northwestern Middlefield, the site of a number of undated native artifacts.

C. Subsistence Patterns:

It is highly unlikely native horticulture was undertaken in Middlefield. Native hunting and fishing probably took place throughout this area as described above.

D. Observations:

The existing evidence suggests Middlefield was utilized as a resource area by the Woronocos centered in present Westfield. Historically, the Woronocos trapped for beaver throughout the Westfield River drainage. Regionally, they probably were a sub-group of the Pocumtucks who inhabited the Middle Connecticut River Valley roughly between the New Hampshire/Massachusetts and Massachusetts/Connecticut borders. The Berkshires provided a natural barrier between the Pocumtucks and the Mohicans situated in the Hudson River Valley. Those areas of greatest potential archaeological sensitivity are the Middle and West Branches (particularly South Hollow) of the Westfield River, the middle portion of Factory Brook and Glendale Falls.

V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails remained as regional routes from Westfield River valley with primary north-south axis along Main Road.

B. Population:

Small native hunting and fishing bands probably continued to occupy Middlefield during this period.

The area lacked a colonial population until the early 1770's.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Native settlement patterns probably were basically the same as those suggested for the Contact period.

D. Economic Base:

The area mostly continued to be a focal point of native hunting and fishing. The establishment of William and John Pynchon's extensive fur trade network centered in Springfield probably encouraged increased native trapping of fur-bearing animals in Middlefield waterways and marshlands.

It is doubtful there was much if any colonial utilization of the local resource base. The existing period settlements had a diversified resource base within the Middle Connecticut Valley and lower reaches of the Westfield River.

E. Observations:

Middlefield was situated on the westernmost periphery of the study unit. Colonial interest in upland areas such as this did not develop until the mid 18th century when the decreased availability of land in the Connecticut Valley and the eastern and southeastern-most portions of Massachusetts forced settlers to look to the western uplands of Massachusetts for property. During this period, Middlefield most likely gained increased importance to the study unit's native population as a resource area because of their displacement from the Connecticut Valley.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Settlement of Worthington, Murryfield (Chester) and Becket established regional highway system through area (c.1765). Primary north-south axis improved as Main Road from Chester with east-west corridor as Town Hill-Reservoir-West Roads around West Hill. Secondary division highways included Arthur Pease, Chipman and Cone Roads from Worthington and Alderman, Pease and West Hill Road from Becket.

B. Population:

Small bands of natives probably continued to occupy Middlefield on a short-term basis throughout the period, particularly since colonial settlement was late and dispersed.

The first colonial settlement occurred in c.1770 with the appearance of three families. The colonial population had only increased to eight families by the end of the period. Area settlers emigrated from a variety of Connecticut towns including Enfield, Voluntun, and Hebron in addition to Pittsfield, Massachusetts.

C. Settlement Patterns:

The foundation for colonial settlement was established with creation of Townships 2, 4 and 9 and Prescott's Grant in 1762 and 1771. Middlefield was included within this territory. However, the first settlement did not take place until c.1770. Period settlement was limited and dispersed. Between c.1770 and 1775 homes were established primarily on or in the general proximity of the southern half of Main Road. The remaining homes were constructed adjacent to Cotes Brook slightly east of the Middlefield/Becket line, near Factory Brook approximately one-half mile north of its junction with Town Hill Road and Glendale Falls on Clark Wright Road. The settlement lacked a meetinghouse until 1791.

D. Economic Base:

The local economy focused on livestock grazing and lumbering. Crop production was limited because of the area's absence of good cropland. Local timber and timber products were probably sold to river towns such as Hatfield, Northampton, Springfield and Westfield. The only documented period mill operation was the settlement's first grist and sawmill complex established by John Rhoads in c.1773 on Wright Brook near its confluence with the Middle Branch of the Westfield River.

E. Observations:

Middlefield had one of the latest settlement dates and was one of the least populated of the study unit towns during this period. The community probably was an important resource area for the study unit's Connecticut River towns and Westfield. However, Middlefield's location on the unit's western periphery suggests area settlers had commercial contacts with the Berkshire Hills settlements and the easternmost portion of New York. There is an excellent likelihood of archaeological evidence of the period settlements surviving throughout the southern half of Middlefield. Assessment of the condition and the extent of the Rhoads mill site should be made since this complex was an important facet of the settlement's economy.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Continuing improvement of regional highways along Westfield River gorge with Pontoosuc Turnpike from Chester (c.1800) and River Road along Middle Branch of Westfield from Worthington. Primary north-south axis remained as Main Road with focus of local highway system at Middlefield Center after location of meetinghouse (1791). East-west connectors from town center included Town Hill and Bell Roads to Factory Brook and Glendale Brook.

B. Population:

Middlefield's population 1790-1830 rose 18.4%, about average for many of the hill towns, though well below the 60.7% county average. Her greatest growth occurred in the decade 1790-1800, peaking in the latter year at 877. Beginning in that year, the town began a gradual decline that lasted 130 years. In 1830 her population stood at 720.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Location of meetinghouse (1791) established civic focus at Middlefield Center with local mill sites along Factory Brook at Brush Hollow (1790). Upland farming extended to limits of highland agriculture along axis of Main Road with lumbering and sheep grazing in hill lands along Westfield River valley.

D. Economic Base:

Period saw the initiation of Middlefield's wool growing and prosperous woolen manufacture, with the resulting development of Factory Village on Factory Brook.

A small limestone quarry and kiln were opened and begun, probably in the 1790s. The discovery of a soapstone deposit in the northeast part of town (Smith's Hollow) led to the incorporation in 1810 of the Middlefield Freestone Co., capitalized at \$160,000 (virtually the only instance of outside Boston investment in the town in the early 19th century). A major impetus for the operation, however, appears to have come from Thomas, Charles, and John Shephard of Northampton, who the same year had incorporated the Northampton Cotton and Woolen Mfg. Co. (cap. \$100,000), the largest woolen mill in the valley for most of the Federal period. Soapstone rollers were frequently used in woolen and cotton mills of this period. By 1813 the freestone company was doing \$12,000 worth of business annually. But the costs of transportation eventually overran the value of the stone, and the operation ceased about 1815.

The town's major manufacturing interest was in wool and wool cloth. The raising of sheep, particularly the Merino breed imported from

Spain in large numbers during this period, became an important source of fine wool during the Embargo years. Fulling and clothing mills established in Blush Hollow were given an added stimulus by the War of 1812, creating a substantial demand for woolen clothing and blankets for the Army and Navy. Smith reports (p.106) that Uriah Church's entire output was taken by the government. In 1814 Church moved to Blush Hollow and built a two-story building for his carding machine. About the same time William Blush built a three-story mill in Blush Hollow, estimated by Smith to have been "probably one of the largest mill buildings in Western Massachusetts" (Smith, p.106). Highly unusual if true, it was also reputed to have been constructed of brick (Stone, 721).

In the 1820s both Blush and Church expanded their operations, possibly in connection with the introduction of Saxony sheep, which the Shephards in Northampton had begun to import. (Were the Shephards directly responsible for the Middlefield flock?) The breed appears to have been remarkably popular, and in the '30s a craze developed for the breed.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Approximately a dozen Federal houses survive in Middlefield; these constitute a significant portion of the total standing structures in the town. Almost all of these are center chimney plan structures, both houses and cottages. Most of the cottages exhibit end gable fenestration typical of Cape Cod cottages; this reflects a common regional pattern in the Hampshire County highlands, much of which were settled by natives of South-eastern Massachusetts. Most of the houses are located at the town center and on Main, Town Hill and Bell Roads. Of note was the use in the period of cornerboards with parallel reeded bands. Notable individual houses include the Ely House (1779), a five bay center chimney plan structure "Colonialized" with a front overhang in 1964; it is the earliest house known to survive in the town and was originally built as a cottage (second story added, 1910). Other early houses are the Root House (1797), unusual for its pyramidal hip roof with center chimney, and the Amasa Graves cottage (c.1782).

Institutional: The first meetinghouse was not built until 1791, despite the fact that the town had been settled c.1774. Prior to 1791, the congregation had met in the David Mack House or barn. The meetinghouse had dimensions of 52' x 44'; in 1819, a spire and belfry tower were added to the structure. In addition to the Congregational Church, Baptist and Methodist churches were founded in 1817 and 1810. A Baptist meetinghouse was constructed in 1818, the Methodist chapel in 1827.

Commercial: Middlefield is unique in that it retains all three of its original Federal period taverns as well as at least two stores of the period. The taverns are the Enos Blossom Tavern (c.1780), the David Mack Tavern (1781) and the Blush Tavern (1783). The

Blossom Tavern differs from the other two in that it is an ell-plan center chimney structure with double five bay facades and a half hip roof, the hallmark of 18th-century taverns. The other two are more domestic in appearance, with center chimney plans and five bay, center entrance facades. The two stores are the Mack Store (c.1804) and the Blush Store (c.1815). Both are two stories in height with gable front orientation and both exhibit three bay facades with center entrances. Center entrances in a three bay facade typically denoted commercial use. The Blush Store also features pilasters with parallel reeded bands, a detail found in the town's residential architecture.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Significant improvement of east-west corridor along Westfield River gorge with construction of Western (Boston and Albany) Railroad (1842). Monumental stone arch bridges survive intact at Middlefield Station over Factory Brook and at Chester line over Westfield River. Local highway system remained focused along Main Road through Middlefield Center with east-west connections to Worthington and Washington.

B. Population:

Middlefield's population, thanks in large part to her industrial development at Factory Village, did not, like the rest of the hill towns, decline. Instead, the number of residents remained fairly steady, in the low 700s. By the end of the period the town's population was 8 persons more than it had been in 1830. The one anomaly in this picture occurred in 1840 when about 1,000 laborers constructing the Western Railroad were living briefly in the town. The population that year was reported as 1,717.

In 1855 15.0% of the town's population was foreign-born -- sixth highest in the county. Though the majority (50%) were from Ireland, an unusual 23% (over three times the county average), mill workers at Factory Village, listed British America as their place of origin.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Civic focus maintained at Middlefield Center with secondary mill village at Brush Hollow along Factory Brook. Opening of Western Railroad along Westfield River (1842) established depot village and mill site at Bancroft. Dairy farming and cattle raising continued on upland plateaus around town center with location of Highland Agricultural Grounds (1857).

D. Economic Base:

Middlefield's economy, though generally agricultural, was dominated during this period by the manufacturing prosperity of the woolen

mills at Factory Village. The tariff of 1828 had brought about a tremendous demand for fine wool, only a third of which could be supplied by existing flocks in the state. A craze developed for raising Saxony sheep (first introduced by the Shepherds at Northampton in the early '20s). Although many towns reported relatively small quantities of Saxony wool in the 1830s, Middlefield

reported a total clip of Saxony wool (in 1836) of 26,741 lbs. -- 70% of the entire county production that year. There were more sheep in Middlefield than in any other town in the state except Hinsdale and Lanesborough (both Berkshire County). Middlefield farmers were never more prosperous, never had more money than in the thirty years devoted to wool growing (Memorial, p.38).

Even as a mill town, Middlefield was quite prominent in the 1830s, for outside of Hinsdale and Lanesborough, no other hill town in Western Massachusetts could claim four sets of broad cloth machinery in operation (Smith, p.143).

The wool growing industry continued to prosper during the early 1840s. In 1845 there were 9,840 sheep, the greatest number ever. The town Saxony clip, though down numerically, now represented 89% of the county total. After 1846 however, business declined. The tariff of that year reduced the duty on imported woollens, and the new fancy worsteds introduced from England began to displace broadcloth in popularity. This affected the fine wool culture immediately, and the Saxony breed, raised almost entirely for this purpose, quickly lost favor (Smith, 146).

The downturn in broadcloth does not appear to have greatly affected the Factory Village mills. Though Blush turned to satinets for a time, Church expanded in 1848 with the construction of the Lower Mill (related to the opening of the new stop at Bancroft ("the Switch") on the Western Railroad?). His Mountain Mills Gold Band Cloth won a national reputation and in 1855, with Middlefield broadcloth valued at \$42,000, the Church and Blush mills were the only broadcloth mills in the three-county Connecticut Valley area. By the close of the Civil War, this production had grown to \$170,000, the mills employed 75 men and women, and Factory Village, then with a quarter of all the families in town, had reached the height of its prosperity.

The construction of the Western Railroad along the West Branch of the Westfield in 1840-41 spurred the establishment of a small paper mill at the Switch (another located across the river in Becket), which became the town's second largest manufacturing industry. The railroad also briefly revived the soapstone quarry, 1853-60, though again the costs of transportation overran the value of the product. Addison Everett in Smith Hollow devised machinery for turning wooden bowls, said to have "almost revolutionized" the business (Memorial, p.).

With the disappearance of the Saxony flocks, Middlefield farmers turned to raising cattle. The Durham, introduced in 1842, was so far improved that the town became famous for its cattle. At one time, a historian noted in 1883, Middlefield had "the finest cattle in the State" (Memorial, p.39). A reflection of this prominence, and a further spur to it, was the formation of the Highland Agricultural Society in 1857.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Approximately a dozen houses of the mid-19th century and earlier survive in Middlefield. These are either Federal or Greek Revival in style with the majority of the structures being cottages. Center chimney, five bay center entrance plans and side-hall plans are standard. A few two story houses were built at the town center and, after 1847, at Middlefield Station (Bancroft). These include sidehall Italianate and Greek Revival houses and one notable double chimney Italianate villa (1868) with a three-bay-square plan, polygonal bays, a mansard roof and belvedere. The villa is located on Main Road at the town center. Also known is the Hiram Taylor House (1848), a double chimney, five bay center entrance facade Greek Revival house. Later additions made when the house became a hotel (c.1910) have greatly enlarged the house. At least one two-story section was originally built as a mill building.

Institutional: Significant construction occurred at the town center in the period. After the construction of the town's first town hall (26' x 36') in 1847, the Federal period Baptist and Methodist churches were both relocated to the town center, in 1847 and 1853. The original 1791 Congregational meetinghouse was also remodelled and repaired in 1847. The only other institutional activity was the founding of The Highland Agricultural Society in 1856, for the purpose of sponsoring annual livestock shows. An Agricultural Hall was built in 1859. There were 11 school districts in 1855.

Industrial: Of special note are three single span, arched, coursed granite railroad bridges at Middlefield Station built in 1840 and in 1865.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Continued improvement of Westfield River railroad corridor with relocation of mainline and widening of original bridges (1912) with surviving concrete examples. Local roads remained focused around Middlefield Center.

B. Population:

After 1870 the town's population began to decline, and between that year and 1915, the town lost over half its population. Between 1880

and 1895 the town declined precipitously, though some modest gains were made around the turn of the century.

In 1880 the town reported nearly 20% foreign-born residents, much the largest number of whom (73%) were Franch Canadians. By 1915 the number of immigrants had retreated sharply to just over 10%.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Middlefield Center remained as civic focus with secondary industrial village at Bancroft along Westfield River. Local mill sites along Factory Brook disrupted by Flood of 1874 and 1901 with gradual decline of settlement in Brush Hollow. Cattle grazing continued on upland farms along Main Road with lumbering in Westfield River hill lands.

D. Economic Base:

A sequence of disasters struck Factory Village in the early 1870s: fire destroyed the Upper Church mill in 1871; the Great Boston fire of 1872 destroyed valuable stock stored in Boston warehouses; the Panic of 1873 caused a serious slump in the market for woollens; and in 1874, following by less than two months an identical disaster in Williamsburg, Factory Village was inundated by the breaking of the Reservoir Dam at the head of the village. (Although no lives were lost, and the damage of much less magnitude than the Mill River disaster, the descriptions of the flood and the rush to alert inhabitants all the way down to Huntington, are similar.) Despite the setback, however, the mills were rebuilt, and on the surface things seemed to return to normal. But the supplanting of broad-cloths by worsteds in the popular taste, plus the competition of better equipped factories nearer labor and transportation centers, put the products of out-of-the-way mills at a disadvantage. Output slowed, population declined, and, after the flood repairs, there was very little new building in the Village or the town. In 1901, when the dam again gave way, causing similar damage, the mill owners, then a quartz-grinding firm, were prohibited from rebuilding it. With that, industry departed from Factory Village. Only at Bancroft did a small industrial population remain, connected to the paper mill and the railroad.

Throughout the Late Industrial period, the town recorded a steady increase in agricultural products -- especially potatoes, apples, eggs, butter, cream, and milk. A small cheese factory on the Chester Road was reported in operation in the 1870s.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Very little residential construction took place until after 1900. After 1900, some construction activity occurred as summer residents began to frequent the town. The exception to this was at Bancroft where several Queen Anne cottages were built to

house mill workers. Houses at the town center include a few shingled and cobblestone Shingle Style and Queen Anne cottages (probably architect designed) on Main Road as well as one or two simple pyramidal hip roof Colonial Revival houses.

Institutional: In 1900, the Town Hall (1872, built to replace the original 1847 hall) and the Congregational Church both burned. The present Town Hall, a very simple two-story building two bays wide by five bays long with a gable roof, dates from 1901. The Congregational Church (1902-04) was constructed from fragments of the 1847 and 1853 Baptist and Methodist meetinghouses. It is an ell-plan one-and-a-half story structure with a square entrance tower and Queen Anne detailing. Also built in the period was a Grange Hall (1912).

Industrial: Of special note are two single span, parabolic arch, reinforced concrete railroad bridges, built in 1912 and 1913, at Middlefield Station. These are early examples of the use of reinforced concrete in addition to being examples of a form (parabolic arch) not commonly found in Massachusetts.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Improvement of local roads as secondary auto routes with primary north-south corridor from Chester to Pittsfield along Main Road through Middlefield Center. No state highways through area.

B. Population:

Middlefield's population, the smallest in the county, reached its nadir in 1930 at 192 residents. By 1940 the town had gained a negligible amount reaching 201 that year. Net loss for the period amounted to 38% of the 1915 population.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Civic activity remained focused around Middlefield Center with local railroad village at Middlefield Station. Dairy farms maintained along upland plateau of Main Road with lumbering along Westfield River valley. Gradual development of recreational sites in hill land around town center from Chester.

D. Economic Base:

No new industries identified. Only the paper mill at Bancroft remained of Middlefield's earlier industries, with 25 employees reported in 1930. Smith noted in 1924 that the town had a substantial summer colony; the new Middlefield was strictly agricultural.

E. Architecture:

The only residential construction observed for the period were some simple gable and pyramidal hip roofed cottages on Town Hill

Road at Brush Hollow and at Bancroft. A one or two gambrel roofed Colonial Revival cottage stand on Main Road at the town center and may date from the period. Also known are two reinforced concrete railroad bridges at Bancroft (1928).

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

General: The majority of Middlefield's significant architectural resources have been inventories. These include all known extant pre-1850 structures. The only buildings of note not included are the few early 20th century Colonial Revival summer houses at the town center, some of which are quite well-detailed.

XII. SOURCES

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