

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

MONROE

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.

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: 1982

COMMUNITY: MONROE

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Monroe is the smallest town in Franklin County with an area of approximately 12 square miles. The town is situated within the Berkshire Hills of western Massachusetts. Local terrain is characterized by rugged uplands which are the highest in the Connecticut River Valley study unit. Elevations consistently extend over 2000 feet, excluding the Deerfield River terrace which averages approximately 1050 feet above sea level. The highest points are Crum Hill (2841') and the twin peaks of Spruce Mountain with heights of 2730 feet and 2600 feet, all of which are located in southwestern Monroe. The Deerfield River separates Monroe from the original mother town of Rowe. Area brooks such as Dunbar, Haley and Parsonage brooks drain southeast from the uplands into the Deerfield River Valley. Monroe's only freshwater body was Brown's Pond, a small mill pond located in the town's geographical center.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Originally established as The Gore between Myrifiield township (Rowe) to the east (1762) and the Bernardstone Grant to the west and south. Northern boundary defined by Massachusetts-Vermont state line (1777) with western and southern boundaries of Bernardstone Grant confirmed by incorporation of Florida in 1805. Eastern section of The Gore annexed from Rowe west of Deerfield River and incorporated as town of Monroe in 1822.

III. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Isolated hill town with access to secondary corridor from Vermont to Mohawk Trail. Located on uplands of Hoosac Range with native site potential suspected along Deerfield River gorge. Belated settlement from Rowe after Revolution with formation of town center attempted along Main Road marked by early cemetery and later school house. Limited agricultural potential as sheep grazing on highlands of Dunbar Brook with some mid-19th century farm cottages near Vermont line. Primary economic development focused at Monroe Bridge from Hoosac Tunnel connections in Deerfield valley with late 19th brick mill, worker's cottages and boarding house along River Road. Civic center relocated from highlands to Monroe Bridge by early 20th century with period school. Dairy farming maintained on uplands with gradual development of recreational potential from Vermont including Early Modern trailer intact on Davis Road. Present growth linked to Rowe nuclear power station along Deerfield River with Monroe Bridge remaining as restricted mill village. Modest expansion from Green Mountain ski area along Main Road vistas with active lumbering in western hill lands.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Isolated highland corridor above Deerfield River gorge with trail routes possible along upland plateau following axis of Main Road (Vermont) to Dunbar Brook. A secondary route may have existed along west bank of Deerfield River as River-Readsboro Road with connecting link to highlands along Phelps Brooks (Hingsley Hill Road).

B. Settlement Patterns:

Both the existing secondary sources and MHC archaeological site inventory made no references to native occupation (prehistoric, historic). Native sites would have been limited to small short-term fishing and hunting camps. The most probable locations would have been on the terrace overlooking the Deerfield River and the plateau extending west of the terrace. Additional fishing sites may have been established along the Deerfield's local tributaries, particularly Dunbar Brook.

C. Subsistence Patterns:

It is unlikely native horticulture was undertaken in Monroe. Native hunting and fishing probably took place in locations described above.

D. Observations:

Monroe's limited resources were only able to support a small seasonal native population. The area most likely was utilized as a secondary resource area by the Squakeags centered in present Northfield. Monroe was situated on the western periphery of the Pocumtucks (defined by the Berkshire Hills) the regional label applied to all the native sub-groups occupying the Middle Connecticut River Valley. The Berkshires roughly delineated Pocumtuck territory from that of the Mohicans of the Hudson River Valley (New York) in the early 17th century. The likelihood of extant archaeological evidence of native period occupation is limited despite the town's lack of development.

V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails remained as access routes to highlands from Deerfield valley.

B. Population:

This area probably continued to support small native hunting and fishing bands. Monroe did not have a colonial population until 1800.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Native settlement patterns were probably similar to those described for the preceding period.

D. Economic Base:

Native subsistence patterns probably were essentially the same as those of the Contact period. There was little incentive for colonial settlers of the period study unit towns to utilize the rugged, upland frontier of the western portion of the Connecticut River Valley study unit. A much more diverse resource base was available in the less exposed Middle Connecticut River Valley.

E. Observations:

Monroe probably continued to be utilized solely as a secondary resource area for the native inhabitants of the Middle Connecticut River Valley.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Trail routes remained as primary transport system with possibility of improvement along Deerfield River Road to Vermont.

B. Population:

This likely supported a small seasonal native population well into the 18th century. Colonial occupation was limited to an occasional hunter or lumberman from nearby settlements in present Rowe, Charlemont and Heath.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Native occupation of Monroe likely increased in response to expanding colonial settlement in the Middle Connecticut River Valley and the more attractive upland areas within the study unit.

D. Economic Base:

Native utilization of this area most likely increased as mentioned previously. Colonial utilization of area resources limited to hunting and timbering. The moderate uplands of eastern Monroe may have been utilized by Rowe farmers for livestock grazing.

E. Observations:

Monroe's limited access and resource base continued to discourage colonial interest in the area.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Significant improvement of road system with settlement of Monroe uplands and location of meeting house (1822) along axis of Main Road. Secondary north-south highways laid out along highland plateau as Gore-Davis Road from town house, North and South Road around Parsonage Brook and Turner Hill Road to Vermont. Connecting highway from town center to Deerfield River improved as Hingsley Hill Road to Monroe Bridge across river to Rowe (c.1825).

B. Population:

The territory which is now Monroe did not begin to be settled until about 1800. The first population figure does not appear until 1830, when the town reported 265 residents -- the smallest number of any town in the Connecticut Valley, a distinction it seems to have retained for much of its history.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Highland farmsteads established along axis of Gore-Davis Roads (c.1800) with meeting house located at intersection of Main Road (1822). Local mill site established on Deerfield River at Monroe Bridge (c.1820) to Rowe. Lumbering developed on western hill lands to Florida.

D. Economic Base:

Monroe's earliest settlement didn't commence until about 1800, and the town was strictly agricultural for most of its 19th century history. Three small saw mills were in operation by 1830 along Mill (now Dunbar) Brook. Of the town, however, the Treasury Report enumerator in 1832 wrote disdainfully:

Monroe is a small town in the northwest corner of Franklin County, containing less than 300 inhabitants. There are no manufactures of any description worth enumerating.

E. Architecture:

In 1830, some 30 houses were indicated on the map of Monroe. Of these, not even a half-dozen are thought to survive. Surviving period cottages are possible on Turner Hill, Main and River Roads. The only houses observed which are believed to be of the Federal period were a center chimney cottage on Main Road near Davis Road, a seven-bay facade, double interior chimney house, possibly an inn or tavern, and another double interior chimney, five bay wide facade house, the last two both on River Road at Monroe Bridge. The latter house was updated ca. 1885 with a two-story Queen Anne porch and one-story veranda. The inn was probably remodelled ca. 1900 as it exhibits some Colonial Revival details. Two school districts were established in 1823 with a third added in 1824 but only one schoolhouse is known to have been

constructed, at Four Corners. It is not thought to survive. The only other institutional activity of the period was the establishment of an informal Universalist Society in 1810. That remained active until 1840, but a church was never organized or built.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Local highway system remained focused along Main Road with connections at Monroe Bridge across Deerfield River. No railroads projected or constructed through area although Hoosac Tunnel located in adjacent Florida.

B. Population:

Rowe's population peaked in 1840 with 282 residents. Although in the late '50s and late '60s the town made slight advances, the net loss for the period amounted to 64 persons.

Only one resident in 1855 had been born abroad -- an Irishman.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Upland agriculture maintained around town center along axis of Main Road to Vermont line with local economic focus at Monroe Bridge on Deerfield River.

D. Economic Base:

Monroe's economy remained entirely agricultural, though a few women (fifteen in 1855) made palm-leaf hats at home. Four sawmills were reported in 1865.

E. Architecture:

Very little residential construction is known to have occurred in the period. Several modest Greek Revival/Italianate cottages with conservative center chimney plans were observed, on Main and River Roads. Also one or two double interior chimney vernacular Italianate houses were built at Monroe Bridge. In 1848, a Town House was built; the small one-by-three bay side-entered frame structure at Main and Davis Roads may be that building or it may be a ca. 1850 schoolhouse.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Improvement of Deerfield River corridor with construction of Monroe Bridge dam and connecting highways from Hoosac Tunnel (Florida) along River Road. Narrow gauge railroad constructed along east (Rowe) side of Deerfield Valley with depot at Monroe Bridge.

B. Population:

Monroe's population, contrary to the pattern established throughout most of the rest of the county, rose in the Late Industrial period due to the establishment of the James Ramage Paper Company at Monroe Bridge in 1887, and the newly-constructed link with the outside world, the Hoosac Tunnel & Wilmington. This growth peaked in 1900 at 305, making a 73% rise in Monroe's population (primarily at Monroe Bridge) in the fifteen years 1885-1900. In the years 1900-10, this figure fell, though by 1915 it had risen again to 296. For the period as a whole, the town's population rose 47.2%, the sixth highest rate in the county. By 1915, with a population of 296, Monroe had lost its standing as smallest town in the county to Shutesbury.

By 1905 employment in the mill had also attracted foreign-born residents. With 27.8%, Monroe had the fourth highest percentage of immigrants in the county. Of these, over half were from Austria.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Civic focus relocated to Deerfield Valley at Monroe Bridge with establishment of paper mill and railroad connections (1886). Highland farming maintained along Main Road axis with lumbering in western hill lands.

D. Economic Base:

By 1875 the total value of manufactured products in Monroe was \$1700 -- the value of lumber from six sawmills. Only Sunderland in Franklin County had a lower value. As late as 1879 Monroe had no formalized church, no organized villages, no mercantile businesses, or other mechanic shops.

All this changed in 1887. The year before Holyoke's premier paper mill builders, the Newton brothers, had constructed a narrow-gauge railroad from the Troy & Greenfield's Hoosac Station up the Deerfield River to their paper mill in Readsboro, Vermont. The Hoosac Tunnel & Wilmington (the "Hoot, Toot & Whistle"), though located on the Rowe side of the river, immediately opened up the "Switzerland of America" (as Picturesque Franklin in 1891 called it). As a result, James Ramage, a genial Holyoke papermaker, taking the advice of his friends the Newtons, built a substantial paper mill in Monroe Bridge. The building of the mill increased the valuation of the town of Monroe over two-thirds by 1891. Ramage also donated to the town a new town hall and schoolhouse for Monroe Bridge.

In the years around 1900 hydro-electric power in the Deerfield Valley became increasingly attractive. In 1910-11 the New England Power Company began construction of four hydro-electric plants along the Deerfield River: two in Buckland, one in Conway, and one, the Hoosac Tunnel Plant ("No. 5") about three miles downstream from Monroe Bridge in the town of Florida. Construction included a 2-1/2 mile long power canal in Monroe, beginning a half-mile below Monroe Bridge. The

plant was designed specifically to deliver 25-cycle single-phase current to the newly electrified Hoosac Tunnel, though its initial role was only as a substation for the tunnel.

E. Architecture:

The only houses of the Late Industrial period observed were a group of two bay wide sidehall plan Queen Anne workers' houses at Monroe Bridge. Also built at Monroe Bridge in the period were a two-and-a-half story hip roofed Queen Anne Town Hall (ca.1895) and a two-and-a-half story gable front store and post office.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Improvement of local highways as auto roads with Deerfield River corridor as secondary axis from Mohawk Trail (Charlemont) to Vermont along River-Readsboro Road (original Route 8).

B. Population:

Between 1915 and 1925 Monroe's population fell sharply, presumably as a result of the shifting fortunes of the paper mill. By the latter date, with a loss of over a third of her population, 143 residents remained, and Monroe had reached her nadir. Although some gains were made in the following decade, by 1940, with the population at 240 (still second lowest to Shutesbury), the town had a net loss for the period of 30%.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Economic and civic focus maintained at Monroe Bridge on Deerfield River with upland agriculture around former town center along Main Road.

D. Economic Base:

The Ramage Paper Company went through several owners. In the '20s it was operated by the Deerfield Valley Paper Company, a manufacturer of Kraft wrapping paper. Employees numbered 125, more than twice the number Ramage had carried. Later the plant was purchased by the Deerfield Glassine Paper, whose product, glassine paper, had only recently been introduced into the United States.

In 1927 the New England Power Company extended their hydro-electric capacity with the construction of the Sherman Dam and hydro-electric station, north of Monroe Bridge.

E. Architecture:

The only buildings of the period noted were those of the Forestry Camp on Main Road. These are all one-and-a-half or two-story gable roofed shingled buildings, probably built ca. 1940.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

Monroe has no inventory of historic buildings. Approximately two dozen buildings represent the entire body of Monroe's period architecture. Monroe Bridge should be inventoried and identification of Federal cottages, if any, and of later 19th century cottages should be made throughout the town.

XII. SOURCES

Picturesque Franklin (Greenfield, 1891).

Carman, Bernard R., Hoot, Toot & Whistle: The Story of the Hoosac Tunnel & Wilmington Railroad (Brattleboro, VT, 1963).

"Power Development on the Deerfield River, Massachusetts," Engineering Record 2/1/1913 (pp. 116-118); 2/8/1913 (pp. 153-157); 2/15/1913 (pp. 181-184).