

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

PELHAM

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.



MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION

William Francis Galvin, Secretary of the Commonwealth

Chair, Massachusetts Historical Commission

220 Morrissey Blvd.

Boston, MA 02125

www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc

mhc@sec.state.ma.us / 617-727-8470

MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

DATE: OCTOBER, 1982

COMMUNITY: PELHAM

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Pelham falls within a region of rugged uplands. The greatest elevations occur in the eastern two-thirds of Pelham where the uplands generally range between 950' and 1150' in height. Several prominent points include Mt. Lincoln, the town's highest elevation at 1238', an unnamed peak northeast of Mt. Lincoln (1195') and Dodge Hill (1049'). Heading west, the uplands gradually decrease in elevation dropping to slightly over 300' on the town's western border. Several pockets of marshland are scattered about Pelham, primarily within the town's interior. Pelham lacks any major rivers. The only local waterways are several brooks which flow into the town's center and to the southwest, eventually draining into Fort River (Amherst), a tributary of the Connecticut River. The original northern portion of the Swift River, situated on the town's eastern border, was inundated with the creation of the Quabbin Reservoir in the late 1930's and early 1940's. The Hill Reservoir is Pelham's only other body of freshwater.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Originally granted as part of Equivalent Lands in 1713 with western boundary at Hadley (Amherst) line of 1663 and southern line with Springfield (Ludlow) of 1684. Sold to John Stoddard of Northampton and purchased by Scotch-Irish proprietors as Stoddard Town in 1738. Lot division established in 1739 and incorporated as town of Pelham in 1742 with southern boundary at Belchertown (1761) and northern line at Shutesbury (1761). Southern district of Packardsville annexed from Belchertown in 1788. East Parish established in 1786 with boundary at Swift River and incorporated as town of Prescott in 1822. Formation of Quabbin Reservoir in 1927 included portion of Enfield (1816) in southeast corner (Packardsville) with boundary at Swift River. Prescott and Enfield disincorporated in 1938.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Rural hill town on periphery of Connecticut Valley corridor from Amherst and Quabbin Reservoir. Located on the edge of central uplands with native site suspected at Orient Springs. Scotch-Irish settlement as Stoddardtwn during Colonial period with important survival of original mid 18th century meetinghouse at Pelham Center. Limited agricultural potential except as upland grazing with some Federal period cottages along Amherst Road. Craft villages developed during Early Industrial period at West Pelham and Packardsville (now Quabbin Reservation) with well-preserved Greek Revival churches at Pelham Center and Harris Brook, including period house on Butler hill. Isolated location limited further development during Late Industrial period with increasing suburban expansion from Amherst

by early 20th century, including notable Craftsman bungalow in West Pelham. Construction of Quabbin Reservoir in Swift River valley flooded portion of Prescott and Packardsville before Second World War. Present development is restricted along Amherst Road from West Pelham, while Pelham Center retains authentic village character around historic meetinghouse despite recreational traffic along Route 202 corridor to Quabbin Reservation.

IV. CONTRACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Secondary corridor through central highlands between Swift River and Connecticut Valley with no documented trail routes. Probable trail conjectured along Amethyst Brook to Orient Springs (West Pelham) along axis of Valley Road. North-south connector to Swift River conjectured along Caldwell Brook to Pine Hill (Pelham Center) with possible link along Shutesbury Road. Trail routes also likely to Mount Lincoln along Dunlop Brook from Pine Hill.

B. Settlement Patterns:

There were no reported native sites in the MHC prehistoric inventory. Native occupation was probably restricted to small seasonal hunting and fishing camps scattered throughout the town's uplands and along local streams and brooks. Particularly likely locations are the uplands immediately west of Shutesbury Road/northern portion of Rt. 202, the junction of Amethyst and Dunlop brooks and the Quabbin Reservoir (former course of the Swift River).

C. Subsistence Patterns:

The Pelham area had limited agricultural potential. Potential crop producing land was probably restricted to the uplands west of Shutesbury Road and the northern portion of Rt. 202. Pelham had the greatest potential as a fishing and hunting area when considering the presence of extensive uplands and the network of streams and the Swift River.

D. Observations:

Pelham probably was an important hunting area for natives inhabiting the major native settlement areas situated at Hadley and Brookfield. The greatest likelihood of extant period sites should occur on the uplands west of Shutesbury Road/northern portion of Rt. 202 and the vicinity of the confluence of Amethyst and Dunlop Brooks.

V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails remained as local routes between Connecticut and Swift River valley.

B. Population:

Native occupation probably continued to be restricted to small, seasonal hunting bands.

There was no pre-1675 colonial population.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Native settlement patterns were probably similar to those suggested for the Contact period.

D. Economic Base:

Native subsistence patterns probably remained basically the same as those for the Contact period.

It is likely the colonial residents of valley towns such as Hadley, South Hadley and Northampton undertook lumbering in the Pelham woodlands.

E. Observations:

The Pelham area was situated on the eastern periphery of the native and colonial settlement focal points situated along the Connecticut River. Pre-1675 colonial settlement of Pelham was discouraged by the area's rugged terrain and the availability of more productive land within the Connecticut River Valley.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Survey of Stoddard Town division (1739) and location of Pelham meetinghouse (1743) created rangeway grid from town center along north-south axis of Route 202. Primary east-west highway located as Amherst-Greenwich Road through town center with secondary connector to Shutesbury around Mount Orient. (Note: local highways unnamed and many discontinued in Quabbin Reservation).

B. Population:

It is unclear if Pelham had a native period population.

Pelham's colonial population consisted of approximately 16 families in the early 1740's. The settlement had increased to 57 families 371 individuals and 57 houses by 1765. Further growth took place between this date and 1776. By the later date Pelham's population had almost doubled to 729 individuals. The majority of Pelham's period occupants were Scotch-Irish Presbyterians and former residents of Worcester. The town may have had a small Baptist population by the end of the Colonial period.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Pelham's colonial community was not attacked during the Indian Wars of the 18th century. Initial colonial settlement took place shortly after John Stoddard's sale of "Equivalent Lands" (included Pelham) to a number of Worcester residents in 1739. By the 1740's, a small settlement node had been established on the site of the present village of Pelham. This location was the site of the town's first burial ground (c.1739) and meetinghouse (c.1743). Period settlement also occurred west, north and east of this node along Valley Road, Shutesbury Road and east of Route 202, respectively. Some of the eastern settlement occurred in the Swift River Valley (inundated by the Quabbin Reservoir) and present New Salem.

D. Economic Base:

Prior to permanent colonial settlement, Connecticut residents utilized the Pelham area for hunting and grazing land.

Pelham's colonial residents focused primarily on agriculture and lumbering. The most common produce was rye, oats, corn, cider and to a lesser degree, wheat. By the end of the Colonial period, the town was the leading apple producer in Hampshire County. Crop production probably focused in the Swift River Valley and the moderate uplands west of Shutesbury Road and Route 202. There was no documentation of period industrial operations. Thomas Dick began operation of the first tavern in c.1749 and continued to do so until c.1768 (Parmenter 1898:249). He also was licensed to sell "tea, coffee and china ware" from his home in 1763.

E. Observations:

Pelham was one of only three or four communities within the Connecticut River Valley study unit settled primarily by Scotch-Irish natives. The closest settlement with a similar population was Palmer. Pelham's lack of an industrial component probably forced a heavy reliance on period mills situated in Amherst. The town's continued rural nature suggests a high likelihood of extant archaeological evidence of the period settlement. A number of sites may survive in eastern Pelham and underneath the Quabbin, both of which were cleared during construction of the Reservoir.

F. Architecture:

Residential: Approximately a half-dozen Colonial houses are known to survive in Pelham. Of these, all but one (Orient Farm, c.1750) appear to have been constructed originally as half or three-quarter plan structures and later enlarged to five bay status. Colonial period houses include a c.1740 center chimney house on Cook Road with a second story overhang, a three-quarter plan cottage (c.1740) on Amherst Road and a half-plan cottage (also c.1740).

Institutional: Pelham is one of a handful of Massachusetts communities which retains its original meetinghouse. Built c.1743 and finished several years later, the meetinghouse stands two stories tall and features a two-story projecting entrance porch with pediment. Its dimensions are 46' x 36' x 25'. In 1844, the meetinghouse became Pelham's first town hall. Two schoolhouses are known to have been built in the period, one in 1755 and one in 1761.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Continued expansion of local highway system from town center including network of secondary highways from West Pelham as Enfield Road to Butler Hill and Harkness Road to Amherst. Local connectors also developed to Packardsville from Knights Corner with primary north-south axis as Route 202 from Belchertown.

B. Population:

Though Pelham lost a portion of her population in 1822 with the incorporation of the town of Prescott, her population, as represented by density, expanded throughout the period, though there are no clear attractions to explain it. In 1830, the number of residents was 904.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Pelham Center remained as civic focus with upland agriculture around town center. Secondary craft villages formed at West Pelham on Amethyst Brook and at Packardsville on Caldwell Brook by early 19th century.

D. Economic Base:

Despite its steep topography and rocky soil, Pelham expanded in the Federal period, as part of the expansion of most Connecticut Valley towns. By 1830, there were five sawmills in use. The first granite quarry in Pelham was opened by an Amherst man before 1820. During the 1820s, the business expanded rapidly, with the stone used for much architectural trim in Amherst, Ware and other towns. About 1827 palm leaf hats were first produced as a cottage industry by local women, who sold them to buyers in Enfield (and later Ware).

E. Architecture:

Residential: Perhaps as many as a dozen houses and cottages of the Federal period have survived in Pelham. The majority of these are cottages, of either center or double chimney plan. These are located in a dispersed pattern along Amherst and Valley Roads. Of the very few Federal period houses observed, all were center chimney plan structures.

Institutional: In 1786, the second parish of Pelham was established. This entity, known as the East Parish, was later incorporated as the town of Prescott. In 1808, a small band of Quakers from Cumberland, Rhode Island, established themselves at Pelham. They subsequently built a meetinghouse which survived through the turn of the century, in eventual use as a barn. Should the meetinghouse survive, even in a debased form, it would be an important reminder of Quakerism, otherwise unknown in the Valley.

Commercial: At least two taverns (c.1780 and 1815) were in operation at Pelham Center during the period.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Primary corridor remained along Amethyst Brook from West Pelham to town center with north-south axis along Route 202. No railroads projected or constructed through area.

B. Population:

Pelham's population continued to expand until about 1850 when it reached its peak count of 983. For reasons not yet clear, between 1850 and 1855 the town lost nearly a tenth of her population, reaching 789 in the latter year. After 1855 this decline continued uninterrupted until 1905. In 1855 only 13 residents had been born abroad, seven of whom were Irish.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Civic focus maintained at Pelham Center with secondary center along Amherst Road at Harris Brook (Butler Hill). Manufacturing villages expanded at West Pelham and Packardville with crossroads at Knights Corner on Belchertown Road. Upland farming continued around town center with lumbering and quarrying in peripheral highlands.

D. Economic Base:

Pelham in the 1840s seems to have reached the peak of her prosperity, with a diversity of small woodworking shops of various kinds. Most considerable of these was the manufacture of wagons. Packard and Thurston had begun making carriages at Packardville probably about 1830. In 1845 carriage making was the town's largest industry, employing 17 men to make 175 carriages annually, worth \$9625. (These figures may refer to Packard & Thurston's operation alone.) Not long after, the firm left Packardville for Belchertown. Second largest industry that year (in terms of product value) was the making of palm-leaf hats, in which 183 women were engaged.

In the early 1850s, Pelham seems to have entered an intense psychological depression, connected with a dramatic loss of population in

the years 1850-55. Haynes noted the poverty of the town in writing that no town in the county in 1855 supported more paupers than did Pelham. Thus perhaps it seemed to the remaining town residents that taxes and town expenses would be less onerous under the adjacent towns of Amherst and Belchertown. In 1854 the town took the unprecedented step of applying to the legislature for the right to give up its charter of incorporation, a move which was repeated periodically until 1870. As the appeal was opposed by the adjoining towns to which parts of Pelham would be annexed, the legislature refused to consider the town's petition.

The town's major manufacturing industry, fishing rods, got its start about 1858 when Horace Gray and son started making split bamboo rods on a mill privilege in the West End. Granite continued to be quarried throughout the period, but apparently in declining quantities. Some Pelham farmers grew tobacco (16 acres in 1865), but the attempt was given up by 1880.

The discovery of a sulfur spring in 1853 by local mineralogist William Newell led to the establishment by the mid 1850s of the Orient House, attracting many visitors and invalids to take the waters.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Some nucleated settlement began to occur at West Pelham in the period. There, several dozen Greek Revival and transitional Greek Revival/Italianate cottages were constructed in the 1840s, '50s and '60s. These include approximately equal numbers of sidehall and center hall (double or end chimney) plan structures. A few of these cottages incorporate eyebrow windows in the attic story.

Institutional: A Baptist church was founded at Packardsville (now inundated by Quabbin Reservoir) in 1831 with a church built c.1835; a Methodist Episcopal church also met at Packardsville after 1838. In 1859, the first Union Congregational Society was organized; the Society was reorganized in 1868 with a meetinghouse built in 1869. That meetinghouse is the Greek Revival structure now standing on Amherst Road at Enfield Street. The present Historical Society is a Greek Revival Congregational meetinghouse built in 1839.

Commercial: Although it burned in 1889, the Orient House noted (1861) was a very fine example of Greek Revival commercial architecture and before its destruction, the period's most outstanding structure, architecturally. Three stories tall with a hip roof with deck and central cupola, the building featured eyebrow windows in the attic story and a prominent Doric portico at the entrance.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Local road system remained intact with expansion of suburban trolley route to West Pelham from Amherst by 1905.

B. Population:

Pelham's population continued to decline until 1905, when under the influence of the trolley route to West Pelham, the town gained slightly, recording 499 persons in 1915. Negligible numbers were foreign born.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Manufacturing villages were maintained at West Pelham and Packardsville with civic focus at Pelham Center. Secondary villages remain at Harris Brook (Butler Hill) and Knight's Corner on regional highways.

D. Economic Base:

Only two manufacturing businesses were listed in the manufacturing census of 1875: a single sawmill, and the production of fishing rods. In 1889 the latter was purchased by the Montague City Rod Company, which had plants at Montague City and Post Mills, Vermont. Between the three plants the firm was said to turn out three-quarters of all the split bamboo rods in the U.S. (Parmenter, 242), employing sometimes as many as 40 men. The bamboo was imported from Calcutta and Japan. Stone quarrying apparently continued, but on an irregular basis.

Probably about 1870 Lemuel Newell discovered a deposit of asbestos on his farm on Butter Hill, which he and others mined for probably 10-20 years. The mineral was sold in Boston and New York.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Very little residential construction occurred in the period. Nearly all period houses observed were located at West Pelham. These include several outstanding turn of the century bungalows and a scattering of more modest Colonial Revival cottages. The bungalows are comparatively large structures exhibiting a number of classic features of the type, such as double gables at porch and roof, exposed rafters and other craftsmanlike details.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Abandonment of West Pelham trolley route and improvement of local highways as regional auto roads. Primary north-south corridor from Athol to Belchertown as Route 202 through Pelham Center. Secondary east-west highway from Amherst to Greenwich improved from West Pelham to town center with eastern section discontinued by Quabbin Reservoir development (1938).

B. Population:

Pelham's population remained in the 400-500 range throughout the period. No substantial gains were made until after World War II.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Development of Quabbin Reservoir required clearance of Packardsville and removal of farmsteads along Swift River valley (1927). Civic focus maintained at Pelham Center with limited growth at West Pelham from Amherst.

D. Economic Base:

No new industries identified. Montague City Rod Co. remained in operation, but the chief source of income for the town was in lumbering and stone quarrying (WPA Guide, 549). Cleared land was largely used for pasturage and blueberry raising.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Residential construction was confined to a few isolated structures. Several modest cottages at West Pelham were probably built in the 1920s, while a few gambrel roof cottages of the period were observed on Amherst Road. Some poultry barns were also probably constructed in the 1920s (example on Amherst Road).

Institutional: The only known institutional construction of the period was the Rhodes School (1925), a one-story Colonial Revival structure on Amherst Road.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

Industrial: Survey should include the Montague City Rod Co. factory (1889?).

XII. SOURCES

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