

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

WENDELL

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: Wendell

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Wendell's area of 31.6 square miles is the 9th largest total of Franklin County towns. The town is dominated by a complex of moderate to rugged uplands. Elevations usually range between 900 feet and 1200 feet. The highest point is Orcutt Hill (1306 feet) southwest of the village of Wendell. Other prominent elevations include Bear Mountain (1274 feet) located in north-central Wendell, Bullard Hill (1182 feet) in northeastern Wendell, and Jerusalem Hill (982 feet) southwest of the junction of the Montague and Erving town lines. A number of small to moderate sized tracts of marshland are situated in these uplands, particularly in the central portion of town. Wendell's only major waterway is the Millers River. The river demarcates Wendell's northern boundary separating it from Erving. The Millers River is fed by a number of minor tributaries that flow from the northern and central uplands into the river. Most notable are Mormon Hollow Brook, Osgood Brook and Whetstone Brook. The southern portion of town is drained primarily by the West Branch of the Swift River and several streams. The West Branch feeds into the Swift River in Shutesbury while the streams drain into Lake Wyola and the Sawmill River in Shutesbury and Leverett, respectively. Local freshwater bodies consist of several mill ponds and Wickett Pond, Wendell's only natural body of water.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Southern section originally included in Roadtown (Shutesbury) grant of 1735 and northern section in Ervingshire grant of 1754 with boundary at Millers River (Erving). Eastern boundary defined with New Salem in 1753 and western boundary with Montague in 1754. Southern section included within Shutesbury in 1761 including western boundary with Sunderland (Leverett). Ervingshire and North Shutesbury incorporated as town of Wendell in 1781 with eastern line of New Salem to Orange and western section of Jerusalem Hill annexed from Montague in 1803 along Lyons Brook.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Isolated hill town with secondary access to regional corridor along Mohawk Trail. Located in central highlands along Millers River with limited native site potential. Settled from Shutesbury during late Colonial period with notable 18th century house on Jennison Road from South Cemetery. Limited agricultural potential on uplands with meeting house location established at Wendell Center after Revolution, including some well preserved Federal farmsteads on Depot Road and cottages to Wickett Pond and New Salem Road. Wendell Center remained as local civic focus through mid-19th century with modest Greek Revival church and surrounding houses, including broad gable example. Millers River developed as important regional railroad corridor before Civil War with settlement at Wendell Depot including period houses. Similar railroad related expansion from Farley including notable

Victorian iron truss bridge and some late 19th century houses along Arch Road to Montague. Area remained isolated through early 20th century despite proximity to Mohawk Trail tourist corridor along Millers River (Erving), although some early auto trailers survive on New Salem Road. Present development limited by restricted location with mobile home expansion evident in upland sites. Town center retains village scale with rural poverty evident in Mormon Hollow from Montague and Wendell Depot from Erving.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Isolated highland corridor from Millers River to Quabbin valley. Secondary east-west trail routes apparently followed Montague Road and Baker-Farley Road to Wendell Center hill with possible north-south connection along New Salem Road to Wendell Depot at Millers River and East Road to Swift River valley. Probably east-west trail from Lake Wyola (Shutesbury) to Quabbin valley likely followed Jennison-Rockwell Hill Road over West Branch of Swift River. Secondary north-south trails from Millers River may have been located along Mormon Hollow Brook to Wendell Center hill and along Rush Road around Orcutt Hill from Swift River.

B. Settlement Patterns:

There were no reported native Contact sites. The town's upland terrain and its absence of large freshwater bodies would have discouraged extensive native occupation. Period sites probably consisted of small to moderate sized fishing and hunting encampments established in the vicinity of Wickett Pond, Wendell's moderate uplands, particularly the central range that Depot Road is situated on and the level area south of Fiske Pond. This last location would have provided immediate access to Lake Wyola situated just south of the Wendell/Shutesbury line. Smaller encampments may have been located on the periphery of local marshlands and the several small level tracts overlooking Millers River.

C. Subsistence Patterns:

Limited native horticulture may have been undertaken on the relatively level summit of the hill Wendell village is located on. The most likely locations for native fishing are Wickett Pond and the Millers River, especially at the river's confluences with Mormon Hollow Brook, Osgood Brook and Whetstone Brook. Hunting probably took place in the vicinity of Wickett Pond, south of Fiske Pond and in and around local marshlands.

D. Observations:

Wendell was probably used as a secondary resource area by the large native populations situated in Montague and Gill. Native occupation was likely most extensive during the spring, late fall and winter months. There is a good probability of extant archaeological evidence of period sites in the previously-mentioned locations because of the town's continued rural nature.

V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails remained as secondary routes from Millers River to Quabbin valley through highlands.

B. Population:

Small to moderate sized native hunting and fishing bands probably continued to occupy the Wendell area.

The town lacked a colonial population until the mid-18th century.

C. Settlement Patterns:

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

D. Economic Base:

Native subsistence patterns most likely were similar to those described in the Contact period. However, there was probably increased native hunting and trapping of fur-bearing animals in response to the development of the Anglo-Indian fur trade in the Middle Connecticut River Valley.

E. Observations:

Wendell remained essentially a native resource area. Colonial interest in development of this upland area was likely discouraged by its hilly terrain and the availability of high quality land in the Middle Connecticut River Valley. Wendell probably fell under the control of the Pocumtucks centered in present Deerfield.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Improvement of east-west corridor with Montague-New Salem Road over Wendell Center Hill and Jennison-Rockwell Hill Road from Locks Village (Shutesbury) to New Salem. Other period highways may have included north-south connector to Millers River along Depot Road around Bear Mountain and east-west branch along Farley-Baker Road to Montague and Mormon Hollow. Rangeway division highways from Roadtown survey (1737) apparently included north-south West, Bullard and Locks Hill Road to east-west axis of Montague Road.

B. Population:

Wendell probably was occupied by small native bands well into the 18th century.

There were no specific figures for the town's colonial population. The majority of "Old Shutesbury's" (Shutesbury, Wendell, portion of

New Salem) population was situated in present Shutesbury. Local settlers were former inhabitants of Lancaster, Sterling, Westminster, Leominster, Lexington and New Salem. Area residents were Congregational.

C. Settlement Patterns:

None of the secondary sources refer to native period sites.

Colonial settlement was late and limited. The first settlement reputedly took place in c.1754 when Thomas Osgood, Richard Moore and William Larned, former New Salem residents, established homes in Wendell. They were followed later in the period by several families who erected homes in the vicinity of Wickett Pond. Additional period homes were probably erected on Montague/East Road and Depot Road. Local residents attended the Shutesbury Meeting House for church services and town meetings since Wendell lacked its own facility until c.1781.

D. Economic Base:

Local residents passed on livestock production and probably lumbering. There were no documented period industrial facilities. Period mills may have been established on Whetstone Brook near its junction with East Road and Osgood Brook near Bowers Pond. Period settlers probably relied on the several mills and tanneries operating in present Shutesbury.

E. Observations:

Wendell is one of the more poorly documented period towns within the Connecticut River Valley study unit. Research should focus on detailing the community's period settlement patterns and economy. Archaeological evidence of the period homes established in the vicinity of Wickett Pond should survive because of the location's limited development.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Location of meeting house at Wendell Center (1783) confirmed radial highway system from axis of Montague Road. Secondary connectors from town center to Millers River included Depot Road along Osgood Brook and Farley Road along Mormon Hollow. Gradual improvement of east-west corridor along Millers River with Arch and Davis Road from Montague connecting to highway around base of Bear Mountain (now abandoned). Other period highways included Wickett Pond Road from Wendell Center and East Road around Wigwam Hill to New Salem.

B. Population:

Commenting on the migratory nature of Wendell's population, a correspondent in Holland's History of Western Massachusetts (1855) noted that Wendell :

has been a great tavern house, where fathers and sons have rested a few years, on their way from the 'lower towns' to the West; and, if the whole household did not go on, the sons were sure to proceed, except the youngest, perhaps, who remained to inherit a worn-out farm, and -- the worn-out parents. (Holland, p.457)

Wendell's population peaked in 1810 at 983 residents, thereafter beginning a decline which continued until 1960 -- longer than almost all other towns in the Valley. In the two decades between 1790 and 1810, the town's population rose by almost 90%. Despite the loss to 874 residents by 1830, the town had a net growth rate for the period of 68.4%, fifth highest in the county for the period.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Civic focus established with meeting house location at Wendell Center (1783) and secondary focus at Baptist meeting house on New Salem Road (1819). Local settlement maintained around Locks Village from Shutesbury with development from Millers River in Mormon Hollow. Upland agriculture expanded to limits of cultivation along axis of Depot-Locks Hill Road from Wendell Center and along West-Wicket Pond Road from Lockes Village. Highland slopes developed for timber resources from Miller River (Erving) between Montague and New Salem.

D. Economic Base:

For the first fifty years of the existence of Wendell, the people depended almost entirely upon their farms for a livelihood. Grain, flax, cattle, sheep and swine were the products.... After this [by the 1820s?] came a series of years when fowls, pork and grain were carried to Boston in the winter; shingles, broom handles and staves were shaved out in stormy weather and long evenings, and the women and children braided straw more, and spun less. (Holland, p.457)

In 1815 John Sawin commenced making chaises -- a business which continued well into the Early Industrial period.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Approximately a half dozen houses of the Federal period survive in Wendell. Among these are several two-story structures and a few cottages. The presence of houses exhibiting a variety of house plans suggests that the surviving structures were built over a long period of time, from the 1780s through the end of the period. Period houses, set in dispersed, rural settings, were observed on Depot, Montague, West and Locks Village Roads. Examples noted included double interior (center hall) and center chimney plan structures as well as one end chimney cottage of only three bays' width. In general, two-story houses tended to be located along Colonial period roads and near the town center with cottages on outlying, Federal period roads.

Institutional: Most of the town's institutional activity occurred in the Federal period. The first meetinghouse of the Congregational Society (formed 1774) was begun in 1781 (1783 according to Holland, History of Western Massachusetts) and finished in 1791. The structure had dimensions of 55' x 40'. In 1799, a Baptist society was organized, with a meetinghouse built east of Wendell Center in 1819. Baptists had met in the town from 1778 on. In addition, in 1791, five schoolhouses were built. The number of school districts was raised in 1827 to ten, but apparently no additional schools were built as only four schoolhouses appear on the 1830 map. Methodist and Universalist societies existed briefly in the town, c.1812 and c.1819, and in 1824, a social library (with no building) was established. The only building known extant is the Baptist meetinghouse, a two-story building, three bays long by three wide, moved to the center in 1845 and presently used as the Town Hall.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Significant improvement of east-west corridor along Millers River with location of Fitchburg Railroad mainline (1848) from Erving to Montague with stations at Wendell Depot and Farley. Local road system remained focused around Wendell Center with improved connections to Farley through Mormon Hollow and Locks Village (Shutesbury).

B. Population:

In the 1840s, Wendell's population made substantial gains, rising to 920 by 1850. Between 1850 and 1855, the town lost nearly a fifth of its residents, and the decline continued in subsequent years, though at a less rapid pace. By 1870 Wendell's population stood at 539, down 41% from the 1850 population.

In 1855 the foreign-born population was split nearly equally between 13 natives of Ireland and 12 from Canada.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Wendell Center maintained as local civic focus with abandonment of Baptist meeting house to town center (1846). Local settlement remained from Locks Village in Shutesbury and in Mormon Hollow from Montague. Location of Fitchburg Railroad along Miller River (1848) stimulated development of Wendell Depot from Erving center. Upland farming remained active around Wendell Center with lumbering on highland slopes.

D. Economic Base:

Holland again takes up the narrative:

[About 1830 ... flax and wool disappeared from among the town's products.] The women and children braided palm-leaf instead of straw. The men either ceased cutting down the forests, or cut them down for a foreign

market. There are now [1855] 14 sawmills in the town, with some machinery for turning.

In 1845 and '55, Wendell produced about the same quantity of lumber, 1,258,000 board feet. In 1845 the quantity represented 10% of the county production and the town was second, after Orange in the number of feet cut. A decade later the same quantity represented only 6% of the county production and the town had fallen to sixth place -- a position it retained through 1865.

Among the wooden product industries to start up in this period was the piano forte case factory of William B. Washburn and Jonathan E. Stone, established on both sides of the Millers River in both Erving and Wendell, around which the village of Stoneville grew up. (According to the 1865 manufacturing returns, 70% of the work at Stoneville was done on the Wendell side.)

A new industry in 1865 was commercial charcoal production. Of the six towns in Franklin County reporting charcoal, Wendell's production of 10,000 bushels (12% of the county production) was second highest in the county after Shutesbury, Wendell's neighbor to the south.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Residential construction continued at a steady pace through the 1840s with approximately a dozen Greek Revival houses and cottages observed in the field. Clusters of housing developed at Wendell Depot and at Wendell Center. Cottages predominated with less than a half dozen two-story houses noted in the field. For both cottages and houses, the sidehall plan was the most common form employed. Sidehall plan Greek Revival houses and cottages were observed on Depot Road at Wendell Depot and Wendell Center. More conservative plans, including both center chimney and double interior chimney plans, continued to be used with frequency. Cottages with center entrance, five bay fronts were observed on West, Locks Village, Depot and Montague Roads.

Institutional: The present two-story, double entrance Greek Revival Congregational Church at Wendell Center was constructed in 1846. The only other institution noted for the period was the town poor farm, purchased in 1842.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Fitchburg Railroad (Boston and Maine) continued as primary east-west corridor along Millers River with local connections from Wendell Depot and Farley to Wendell Center, including original iron truss bridge (1881) to Erving.

B. Population:

Wendell's population fluctuated downward between 1870 and 1915. Between 1880 and 1895, the town made marginal gains, then gaining

and losing small numbers until 1910. In 1910-15, however, the population dropped by 114 people, reaching 388 in the latter year. Altogether, the town had lost 28% of its 1870 population by 1915.

The largest ethnic group in 1905 were 23 Poles, followed by 10 natives of French Canada.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Civic activities maintained at Wendell Center with upland agriculture on surrounding highlands. Economic focus remained at Wendell Depot along Millers River railroad corridor with secondary settlement at Farley to Mormon Hollow and Montague.

D. Economic Base:

By 1875 Wendell's chief manufactured product, valued at \$45,000, was the product of Stone's Piano Case factory, accounting for 66% of the town's total product. In the 1880s, it was followed by two paper mills -- also on the Millers River. At the Boston & Albany Depot, the Goodard Wood Paper Company employed 19 in 1885; and at Farley, the Farley Paper Company was established about 1888. (The Farley company turned the local spruce and poplar trees into pulp and paper, and for years manila paper and wood pulp constituted its products.) By 1913 a wooden box maker, the Millers River Box Company, had also located at Farley.

Charcoal, firewood, and lumber remained important products in this period.

E. Architecture:

For the early years of the period, there appeared to have been almost no building whatsoever. Of some two dozen period cottages observed in the field, most seem to date from 1900 or later. Two-story houses are almost nonexistent; cottages consist primarily of simple one and one-and-a-half story sidehall Queen Anne or hip roof Colonial Revival examples. Late 19th/early 20th century cottages were noted on Depot, West and Locks Village Roads. Two small institutional buildings, a one-story Colonial Revival library (c.1915) and a one-story gable roofed Craftsman school (c.1910), were observed at the town center. A one-story commercial building (c.1900) was noted at Wendell Depot.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Millers River remained as primary regional corridor with Boston and Maine railroad and Mohawk Trail auto highway (Route 2) in Erving. Local highway improvement included north-south axis from Wendell Depot to Locks Village along Depot Road (Shutesbury) through Wendell center with original concrete bridge (c.1915) to Erving and location of Locks Village Road along Plypton Brook to Tyler Pond.

B. Population:

Wendell's population remained steady between 1915 and 1940, closing the period with only four persons more than it had at the beginning of the period.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Wendell center remained as local civic focus with economic activities along Millers River at Wendell Depot and Farley.

D. Economic Base:

No new industries identified. The Farley paper mill was taken over by the Lindale Mills, manufacturing (in 1930) paper box board for the parent concern in North Adams.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

No inventory forms have been completed for Wendell. Pre-1850 structures are few in number and should all be recorded. Of note is the survival of the 1819 Baptist meetinghouse (now Town Hall), one of the few extant meetinghouses of that denomination and period in the region. Given the fact that 131 dwellings stood in the town in 1879 (Sylvester 1879:) and that probably fewer than 70 dwellings have survived, archaeological potential for late 18th and early 19th century domestic sites should be noted. Holland notes that the principal builder of the early 19th century was Benjamin Stiles (Holland 1855:457).

Industrial: Of special interest in the bridge at Farley over the Millers River, built in 1889 by the New York firm of Dean & Westbrook. The pin-connected Pratt through truss is the only known example in the state to use the Phoenix Iron Company's patented wrought-iron "Phoenix columns". The bridge also retains its two richly-ornamented name plates on the portals at either end of the bridge.

XII. SOURCES

None encountered beyond those in the county and regional histories.