

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

ASHBURNHAM

Report Date: 1984

Associated Regional Report: Central Massachusetts

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: 1984

COMMUNITY: Ashburnham

I. TOPOGRAPHY

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Incorporated as town of Ashburnham in 1765 from "Dorchester-Canada" grant of 1735, and several smaller, earlier grants. Part included in new town of Ashby, 1767. Part included in new town of Gardner, 1785. Part annexed to Ashby, 1792. Part of Gardner annexed, 1815. Part of Westminster annexed, 1824.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Ashburnham is a residential and recreational academy town southwest of Mount Watatic on the upper Millers and Whitman rivers and Phillips Brook, and is on an early historic east/west highland corridor to the Connecticut River Valley. Native sites are probable at Upper and Lower Naukeag lakes and at several other sizeable local ponds. First settlement probably occurred at Bluefield Tavern on Northfield Road in the northwest ca. 1734. Mill location between Naukeag lakes, and hilltop meetinghouse site south of Upper Naukeag, are both established by 1738. Native hostilities lead to abandonment of settlement in 1744. Permanent resettlement occurs by ca. 1757, including significant local concentration of Germans on Dutch Farms grant. Dispersed agricultural settlement continues through 18th and early 19th centuries, with a significant local potash industry. Meetinghouse is relocated downhill and south to early 19th century linear village. Manufacturing in the 19th century includes textile mills along Phillips Brook at Blackburn Village after 1811 and at Ashburnham Center after 1849. Mid 19th century chair and woodenware factory concentrations develop at South Ashburnham and Ashburnham Center. Cushing Academy is established at Ashburnham Center in 1875. Local industries decline in the late 19th century. By the early 1900s, significant recreational cottage development begins to take place at local ponds and continues into the Modern period.

Agricultural landscapes remain, with 18th and early 19th century dwellings, most notably on Russell Hill Road in the east. Other significant rural house clusters survive at Lane Village/Packard Hill west of Upper Naukeag Lake and on Tuckerman Road in the northwest. Ashburnham Center retains much of its 19th century structures, including a partial chair factory complex with worker housing, Ashburnham Railroad engine house, a variety of modest residential, commercial, and civic structures, and Cushing Academy campus. Early 19th century worker housing survives along Fitchburg Road at Blackburn Village. South Ashburnham 19th century worker housing concentration survives, although little remains of the industrial complexes. Current residential

development continues on pond sites, although highland exurban development may ultimately threaten remaining rural landscapes.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes

Highland Naukeag Lake area southwest of Wapack Range on upper Whitman River and Millers River tributaries. East/west trail south of Naukeag Lakes conjectured as Russell Hill Road, with a connector to Central Street southwest to Crystal Lake (Gardner). South branch on William Street to Whitman River corridor. Naukeag Lake trail conjectured as Main Street-Lashua Road-Harris Road-Coughlin Road-Packard Hill road-Harris Road west of Upper Naukeag. Heald Road branch northwest to Lower Naukeag extends on Sherbert Road to Lake Monomonac. Northern trail to North Branch Millers River conjectured on East Rindge Road. Northeast branch to Wallace Pond conjectured on Harris Road and abandoned way to Swallow Hill.

B. Settlement Pattern

Like so many northern Worcester County towns, no archaeological sites are reported. Indications of low density come from the division of the area into two drainage systems, the Nashua and the Millers, as well as between two native American groups, the Nipmucks and the Squakeags. The many large ponds in the town, however, must have attracted some occupation to the border area; these include Upper and Lower Naukeag Lakes, Watatic Lake, Winnekeag Lake, Ward Pond, Stodge Meadow Pond, Factory Village Pond, and Wampanoag Pond.

C. Subsistence Pattern

Visits to the upland area was seasonal and brief, by small family or task groups, primarily for hunting and fishing.

V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes

Established trails continue in use.

B. Settlement Pattern

A continuation of pattern established during the Contact period, with some reduction after the Squakeag removal to the north.

C. Subsistence Pattern

A continuation of patterns established during the Contact period.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes

The east/west Northfield Road (1735) reputed to pass through Bluefield Grant in the northwest. Road from Lunenburg through Ashby to meetinghouse center follows Russell Hill Road-River Styx Road, and meets the route from Lunenburg and Leominster/Lancaster through Fitchburg (the Fitchburg Road). Both then follow Main Street-Cushing Street. Southern route to Westminster and Lancaster follows Cushing Street-Cashman Road, with alternate route Lashua Road-Corry Hill Road-William Street. Northeast road from Ashby enters town on an abandoned way to Ashby Road-Old Ashby Road. Western road to Winchendon Center is Coughlin Road-Winchendon Road-abandoned route to Teel Road. The northwest road to Rindge, N.H. follows Packard Hill Road-Harris Road-Lowe Road-Young Road-Bush Hill Road.

B. Population

Settlement was slowed by frontier warfare, but by 1751 there were 30 men in residence. In 1770, 74 men paid taxes; in 1775 the total population equalled 551. A group of Germans purchased land in the 1,000-acre Lexington grant in the east of town. A church was not gathered, nor a minister ordained, until 1760, when 13 men signed the covenant.

C. Settlement Pattern

The town of Ashburnham was granted in 1736 as bounty to heirs of Dorchester who went to Canada in 1690. Prior to this, however, individuals received land within the town's bounds for service to the province: the Starr grant for service against the Pequots in 1650, granted to heirs in 1735; 1,000 acres each to Cambridge and Lexington for maintaining a bridge over the Charles granted in 1734; 450 acres for maintaining a tavern on the road from Lunenburg to Northfield granted in the northwest; 400 to Converse in 1735; and 600 to heirs of a slain Haverhill minister. When the town was laid out, this acreage was added to the 36 square miles, and was sold to individuals independently from the proprietary lands. These latter lands were to be divided among 60 heirs of the soldiers, only one soldier still alive; shares were held by nephews (16), brothers (14), sons (10), as well as cousins, in-laws, among others. The initial land division was for lots of 50 acres, 60 for proprietors, one for the minister, one for the support of the ministry, and one for the schools; they were laid out on the south, east and west shores of Upper Naukeag, south through the center, east to the individual grants at the Fitchburg-Westminster line, and west to South Ashburnham. Later land divisions included 80 acres in 1737 and 1762, the sixth and last took place in 1781. The meetinghouse was located south of the geographic center.

D. Economic Base

Little information is available on the brief, 25-year period of colonial settlement. The town is classified as a Poor Agrarian Town for 1771 by Pruitt, like most towns in northern Worcester County. Newly settled, the town's moderate corn production brought very low community wealth and agricultural prosperity, and high agrarian poverty; with these came low commercial development and propertylessness. The proprietors attempted early (1737) to establish mills in the town, providing acreage to Hezekiah Gates of Lancaster for maintenance of a sawmill between the two Naukeags near Lane Village; he apparently did not satisfy their needs, and the grant was revoked in 1751 and turned over to Caleb Dana, Tim GReen, and Jona Dwight, who added a gristmill soon after. By the end of the period several other mills were established in the town, but their locations are unclear.

E. Architecture

Residential: Extremely poor survival rate. The two-story, five-bay, center chimney house which may be early Federal period. Only dated Colonial period house (1758) is questionable, being a one-story, five-bay, double-pile, end chimney house with Flemish bond brick end walls. This seems more likely a late 18th or early 19th century structure.

Institutional: 40 x 50-foot meetinghouse built in 1739.

Commercial: Reference to inn (1733) on Northfield Road.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes

The colonial roadways continue in use. In addition, the Ashby Turnpike (incorporated 1806, opened 1811) from Keene, N.H. to Ashby Center passes through the northeast part of town. A new east/west route passes to the south of Meetinghouse Hill (Winchendon Road-Main Street) and a new connector (Ashby Road) links Main Street to the Phillips Brook corridor to Ashby. A new county road from Winchendon to Leominster/Lancaster through Gardner passes through the southwest part of town (Old County Road-Platts Road).

B. Population

The town's population grew rapidly during this period, nearly tripling from 581 in 1776 to 1,402 in 1830. The first parish remained Trinitarian, and early rescinded the Halfway Covenant, 1773. By 1778 there were 15 men and women released from ministerial taxes as Baptists; at their height in 1795, 20 families were Baptists. In 1793, a Methodist preacher came to the town, and shortly thereafter formed a society, visited by Lorenzo Dow; some in the south worshipped with the Methodists in Westminster. Some of the town were favorably disposed to the Shakers during their visit in 1782. Although no overt Shays

activity is known for the town, the meeting voted measures to correct measures that had been its cause. The required militia was supplemented by a Light Infantry from 1791. The town purchased a poor farm in 1821.

C. Settlement Pattern

A second meetinghouse (1791) is built on Meetinghouse Hill, and a small residential cluster develops there. Meanwhile some residential concentration develops along Main Street between Ashby Road and Cushing Road to the south of the center. Lane Village develops along Main Street between Ashby Road and Cushing Road to the south of the center. Lane Village develops as a mill hamlet on the west side of Upper Naukeag Lake, and other small mill foci develop at North Ashburnham and South Ashburnham. The main local industrial focus is at Blackburn (FActory) Village in the southeast on Fitchburg, where a cotton mill is operating by ca. 1812.

D. Economic Base

A moderate proportion of the town's land was unimproved or woodlot, 50.3%, but an additional 41.5% was categorized as unimprovable, the county's highest figure. This left only a small amount as improved farmland, .9% in tillage, 2.3% mowing and meadowland, 4.9% in pasturage, all very low figures.

E. Architecture

Residential: Building activity seems to develop slowly. The rear wall chimney plan appears to have been the popular house form. Most examples noted had hipped roofs; one brick house was observed. A single-pile, two-story, end chimney house was also noted. Few one-story, center chimney houses. A two-story, five-bay, brick double chimney house is recorded.

Institutional: Second meetinghouse (1791) built on old common, measured 45 x 60 feet and had handsome entrance porch on long side with quoins and pilastered entry with fanlight and keystone arch. It was voted to paint the meetinghouse pea-green (Stearns), but the decision was subsequently made to use white paint.

The first schoolhouses occurred in the mid to late 1770s. By 1800, nine existed. In 1809, the second central schoolhouse was built on the old common. The site was located in the center in 1818.

Commercial: Reference (Stearns) to hotel on the north turnpike from 1815 to 1857. Site is marked near Route 113 and Old Pierce Road on 1830 map. No building survives.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes

The early 19th century roads continue in use. The Vermont and Massachusetts Railroad loops through the southwest corner of town in 1847, and from Ashburnham Depot, the Cheshire Railroad is opened in 1848 to the northwest through Winchendon, with North Ashburnham Station at Burrageville.

B. Population

The town's population continued to grow during the first half of the period, from 1,402 in 1830 to 2,211 in 1855; thereafter the figure remained between 2,100 and 2,200. Manufacturing employment increased, outstripping the agricultural by the end of the period. At the same time, the proportion of the foreign-born in the town increased, from 8.8% in 1855 to 11.7% ten years later. As in most towns, the Irish dominated early, but were soon matched by the Canadians. Small numbers also came to the town from England, Scotland, and Germany.

Early in the period, 1832, the Methodists were strong enough to build a meetinghouse. A decade later an evangelical society was formed in the north part of town by 55 former members of the first parish, the Methodist, and Fitchburg Freewill Baptist societies as a Union church, but became Congregational in 1860. Some townspeople became involved in the Millerite movement, meeting in South Ashburnham in the 1840s. By 1846 the large number of Catholic men working on the railroad meant services were conducted in the town. As early as 1832 the temperance movement came to the town. In 1834, a Thief Detecting Society was formed.

C. Settlement Pattern

The Central Village grows significantly as a manufacturing and commercial area, and as a civic focus after the 18th century meetinghouse center is abandoned. Secondary manufacturing centers develop at North and South Ashburnham, while the Blackburn textile center persists. Depot hamlets develop at Ashburnham Depot and Burrageville.

Development of the Center as a manufacturing village accelerates after ca. 1840, with industrial growth along Phillips Brook, the emergence of Main Street as a residential, commercial, and civic corridor, and the development of side-street residential clusters. The major industrial development is the Winchester Chair Factory complex (after 1848) south of Main along Mechanic Street. Other industrial growth extends north along Phillips Brook, including a tannery, woodworking mills, and a cotton factory (1849), all east of Ashby Road.

Civic activities concentrate at the west end of Main Street, with the relocation of the second meetinghouse/town house (1831?), the building of the Methodist Church (1832), and the construction of the third Congregational meetinghouse (1833/4) opposite the

Methodist Church at Chapel Street. The commercial focus remains to the east of the civic area around the Central Street intersection. Intensive residential development and infill occurs on Main from High Street east to Grove (River Styx Road), with extensions north on High, Cushing, Chapel, Lawrence, and Ashby Road. Less residential growth extends south on School, Pleasant, and Central. Worker housing rows are built on Union Street to the south.

Secondary industrial development occurs at South Ashburnham, with a number of small chair manufacturing factories along the Nashua River Branch, and residential development along Westminster Street and south on Williams Street. To the west, Ashburnham Depot is established with the coming of the railroads in the late 1840s, and includes an engine house, station, and some residential development on the north side of Westminster Street. At Blackburn Village, a larger mill is built in 1846 after the earlier factory burns, but little other development occurs. A small cluster of woodenware manufacturing emerges at North Ashburnham, and a Union Church is built there in 1842. Some homes are built south on Lake Road. A second local depot is opened at Burrageville in the late 1840s, but a factory built at the same time burns in 1858. By period's end, a few chair shops are active in the area. Outside these areas dispersed agricultural settlement continues, and a number of small sawmills are active.

D. Economic Base

E. Architecture

Residential: The gable end house form appears to have been the predominant type for the period. Several one- and two-story, five-bay, gable end, center entry houses, some of brick, were noted. The center is especially rich in gable end Greek Revival houses. The rear wall chimney house extends into the Greek Revival period. Three one-story and two two-story examples were noted. Gable end side-passage and center entry houses also occur in South Ashburnham. The gable end house remains popular in the Italianate period as well. The Gothic Revival is represented by a brick, one-story, side-passage plan with pointed-arch windows and a five-bay, double chimney, one-story house with pointed-arch trim extending above rectangular sash windows; both houses are in the Center.

Institutional: The third meetinghouse is located in the center and was built in 1834. A Union Church (Evangelical?) was organized in North Ashburnham ca. 1840-50. This organization disbanded and in 1860 a Second Congregational Church was built in North Ashburnham. The building no longer exists. A Methodist church (41 x 56 feet) was built on Main Street in 1832. The building was acquired by the Roman Catholic Church in 1871, and a modern Catholic church is on the site today.

The 1791 meetinghouse was rebuilt in 1838 as the town hall and now houses the Ashburnham Historical Society.

Commercial: Two mid-19th century stores survive in the Center. One is a brick gable end and the other a frame gable end.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes

The Ashburnham Railroad is incorporated in 1871 and completed in 1874. Built with local capital, the branch line connects Ashburnham Center to the main roads at South Ashburnham Depot.

B. Population

The town's population fluctuated greatly during this period: from 2,172 in 1870 the total fell rapidly to a period low of 1666 in 1880; a recovery followed with the population averaging ca. 2,100, followed by another drop early in the 20th century, and another return to ca. 2,075 at period's end. Manufacturing employment became even more dominant, with over 350 men so employed except for a similar dip ca. 1905; agricultural employment diminished somewhat, employing ca. one-third as many men as manufacturing. The foreign-born proportion of the total reached 14% by 1875, and maintained that figure through the 19th century; French Canadians were by far the most numerous within this group, followed by the Irish and Nova Scotians. During the early years of the 20th century, the foreign-born increased to 15.3% in 1905, and to 19% ten years later; during these years the most significant change was the addition of Russian Finns, who nearly reached the number of French Canadians by 1915. The increase in the Catholic population brought with it the purchase of a meetinghouse, as St. Denis in 1871, a mission in South Ashburnham in 1893, and the establishment of a parish in 1895.

A generous bequest brought the founding of Cushing Academy in 1865; from 1868 to 1878 the town offered high school terms, but these were later taken over by the Academy. Districts were abolished in 1878. That same year, a Farmers' and Mechanics' Club was formed. Ten years later South Ashburnham formed a Military Band.

C. Settlement Pattern

Growth in the Ashburnham Center occurs primarily in institutional and civic functions, while some industrial expansion occurs at South Ashburnham, and the smaller industrial centers stagnate or disappear. At the early 19th century Main Street civic focus, a new Methodist church is built in 1870, and the Catholics occupy the old Methodist church in 1871. The major institutional development, however, is the establishment of Cushing Academy between School and Pleasant Streets, south of Main Street. The main building, dedicated in 1875, is replaced in 1893 after a fire, and several other buildings are added to the complex during the period. On Main Street, the civic focus shifts eastward with the Stevens Library (1890) at Water Street, and the Fairbanks Memorial Town Hall (1905).

The Ashburnham branch railroad station (1874) is located off Central Street, near established commercial and industrial activities. Industrial activity peaks in the 1880s, when the Boston Chair Manufacturing Company complex includes 30 buildings. Some residential extension occurs south on Pleasant Street, at the southern end of Central Street, and on Proctor Street, east of Phillips Brook, but the extent of the village remained essentially the same.

In the south, industrial development leads to the merging of Ashburnham Depot and South Ashburnham as one continuous settlement as residential expansion moves west on Westminster Street and north and south on South Ashburnham Road. Chair manufacturing intensifies along the Nashua River. In the east, residential infill occurs around the established Westminster Street/William Street focus, with additions on Highland and Maple Avenues. North of Westminster Street, worker residences are built on School and Cross Streets. On South Ashburnham Road, residences extend both east and west of the railroad corridor. Institutional additions include the People's Church (1885) on Westminster Street, and St. Anne's Catholic Church (1893) on South Ashburnham Road at Cross Street.

Little development occurs outside these two centers. North Ashburnham changes very little, and the Union Church burns in 1911. The Blackburn Village textile mill burns in 1877, and the Burrageville chair shops are gone by the 1890s. Some recreational cottage development occurs by the 1890s on the Naukeag Lake islands, and a small number are built by Winnekeag Reservoir, and Ward Pond.

D. Economic Base

E. Architecture

Residential: Little significant development apparent. Some late 19th century gable end, Queen Anne houses, one elegant Shingle Style house in the center, and a late Gothic/Queen Anne house characterize the period. A two-story, duplex ("double decker") was observed in South Ashburnham.

Institutional: Early in the period, the 1834 meetinghouse was raised up on a rusticated foundation and enlarged and thoroughly remodelled. The present gable end structure has a central projecting entry tower and spire and rounded-arch windows and door. The second Methodist Church was built in 1870 and is a gable-end structure with hood molds, apparently no longer in use as a church. A Roman Catholic chapel was built in South Ashburnham in 1893.

The Cushing Academy was constructed in 1875 and is a 2 1/2-story, brick Victorian Gothic building (52 x 132 feet). Other buildings were added to the campus later in the period (ca. 1900), which include two- and three-story, brick Colonial Revival structures. The Dolley Whitney Adams School (abandoned for adjacent modern building) appears to have been built in the 1880s and is an Arts

and Crafts style building. The 1890, one-story, brick Romanesque public library was built by J. M. Currier.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes

By the mid 1920s, the southeast/northwest Fitchburg-Winchendon corridor is improved as part of regional auto highway Route 12 (Fitchburg Road-Main Street-Winchendon Road). By the late 1920s the old Ashby Turnpike is upgraded as part of Route 119 (Rindge State Road). By the 1930s the northeast connector from Gardner through South Ashburnham and Ashburnham Center to Route 119 is improved, and by 1940 is upgraded as Route 101 (Central Street-Willard Road-Ashby Road) with a new connector west of Ward Pond.

B. Population

The population of the town remained fairly constant during this period, fluctuating between 2,000 and 2,100, except for a peak of 2,159 in 1925 and 2,255 in 1940. The proportion of foreign-born fell from 19% to 14.2%, with 9.7% of the population characterized as rural in 1940.

C. Settlement Pattern

Most period development takes place as lakeside cottage construction. In the Center, some residential development occurs south of the Academy on Central Street and Willard Road. Most of Burrageville and North Ashburnham disappear. Intensive cottage development takes place around Lower Naukeag Lake, Winnekeag Lake (Wellville on west shore), Stodge Meadow Pond, and Ward Pond. Camp Collier is established on Lake Wampanoag in the southeast.

D. Economic Base

E. Architecture

Residential: Little evidence of building activity. Bungalow noted.

Institutional: The town hall is a ca. 1930 two-story, brick Colonial REvival building.

A sixteen-sided, concrete water tank stands at the junction of Lashua, Hastings, High, and Lane Roads north of the Center.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

Inventory seems to be sketchy. Even the Center could be more comprehensively documented, including public buildings.

XII. SOURCES