

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

OAKHAM

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.

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MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

DATE: 1984

COMMUNITY: Oakham

I. TOPOGRAPHY

The hill town of Oakham, located in the southwestern portion of central Worcester County, forms the northern third of a high plateau, which includes New Braintree and North Brookfield to the south. The northern boundary of this plateau, which in Oakham ranges from 800 to 1,100 feet above sea level, is formed by the Ware River; Five Mile River, which flows from north to south a short distance east of the center, forms the eastern edge of the plateau. East of the Five Mile River valley, which descends to less than 800 feet above sea level, the surface rises again to elevations reaching 1,000 feet above sea level.

A number of streams cut the town's surface. Bell Brook and Burrow Brook drain the western half of the town into the Ware River, while the eastern and southern portions are drained by Five Mile River and its major tributary, Maynard Brook. Seven Mile River passes through the extreme eastern corner of the town as it flows from Rutland into Spencer and then East Brookfield, where it joins the Quaboag River.

Oakham's soils are composed largely of Brookfield series loams, ranging from stony loam on the hillsides to fine loam on the hilltops. Paxton and Charlton loams also occur on the tops of the gently rounded hills. These soils, where not too stony, were extensively cultivated and yielded excellent crops of hay and grains. Along the Swift and Five Mile River valleys, the terrace and outwash deposits consist of Merrimac and Hinckley series gravelly loams. The former is an agriculturally important soil, yielding moderate crops of hay, grain, and vegetables, while the latter, because of its droughty character, is rarely used for more than pasture.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Included in 1686, twelve-mile square "Naquag" Indian grant, and in town of Rutland incorporated in 1714. Incorporated as a district (Rutland West Wing) from part of Rutland in 1762. Made a town in 1775.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Residential hill town on Five Mile River corridor, with possible native sites at Muddy Pond and Browning Pond. First permanent European settlement as peripheral area of Rutland ca. 1845 by Scots-Irish Presbyterian immigrants. Meetinghouse was established 1761. Dispersed 18th century agricultural settlement, with development of small early 19th century village at meetinghouse center, and 19th century mineral springs resort at Coldbrook.

Little industrial development, with abandonment of marginal farmsteads and population decline from 1850 to 1950. Coldbrook Springs settlement removed as part of Quabbin Reservoir Aqueduct system. Significant southern tracts now state forest. Intensifying suburban development may threaten remaining agricultural landscapes. Significant percentage of 18th and early 19th century vernacular dwellings remain, although a number are deteriorating or abandoned. Mid-19th century Oakham Center is largely intact.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes

Upland tributary area south of Ware River corridor, with northeast trail from Quaboag area along Five Mile River corridor inferred along North Brookfield Road. Conjectured branch north to Ware River and Coldbrook mineral springs on Corner Road-Coldbrook Road.

B. Settlement Pattern

Like so many of the northern Worcester County upland towns, few sites are reported, and none carefully described. Low density is expected in this hilly area, with some potential along Browning, Dean, Muddy, and Adams ponds, and the Five Mile River.

C. Subsistence Pattern

Seasonal hunting and fishing by small family and task groups in the area from base camps to the south.

V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes

Contact period trails continue in use.

B. Settlement Pattern

Continuation of patterns established during Contact period.

C. Subsistence Pattern

Continuation of patterns established during Contact period.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes

Peripheral area of Rutland, with routes to Rutland meetinghouse on Pine Plain Road, North Brookfield Road, and Crawford Road. Roads from dispersed farmsteads to local meetinghouse established after 1761.

B. Population

First population figure is for 1749, when ten families lived in the area; in 1750, the total grew to 34 families. By 1765 the total was only 270, but ten years later had expanded to 598. The most significant factor of Oakham's population was the presence of Scots-Irish immigrants, who had come to the parent town of Rutland but had relocated, with their Presbyterian meetinghouse, from the West Rutland area. Initially, they outnumbered native Congregationalists and so the town's first established church (1767) was Presbyterian. By 1773 the balance had shifted and a new covenant was signed by 31, although no minister would be settled until 1786. Some Presbyterians left the town for western New York at this time.

C. Settlement Pattern

Oakham was the southwest corner of the twelve-mile purchase of 1686 from Native Americans in the praying town of Natick, confirmed in 1713. It was originally known as Rutland West Wing, or the Dublin District. First settlement came in 1749 when ten families moved there from Rutland. The land was divided into 52 lots of 250 acres each.

D. Economic Base

Pruitt categorizes the town as Poor Agrarian, one of a few so labeled in the county. Upland primarily, the settlers of neighboring New Braintree criticized the quality of the land during debates over the town's formation. Grazing was emphasized within agricultural pursuits.

E. Architecture

Residential: Limited number of surviving buildings, all of which date to the early 1770s. Two single-story, center chimney plans and two two-story center chimney plans are recorded. A ca. 1770 two-story dwelling on Crocker Nye Road in northwest Oakham appears to have originally been a double chimney form that has undergone major alterations in the early 20th century. Dwellings known to have existed by early third quarter 18th century.

Institutional: Town purchased Presbyterian meetinghouse from West Rutland in 1761 and moved to Oakham Center and rebuilt it without steeple. Work not completed until 1785.

In 1767, the town voted to built five schoolhouses; these first are said to have been log.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes

The colonial roads continue to be used. In addition, the Sixth Massachusetts Turnpike (chartered 1801) runs across the northern

part of town (Old Turnpike Road), bypassing Oakham center. A new county road from New Braintree to Worcester (Robinson Road-South Road) is established through the southern part of town.

B. Population

The town's population continued to grow throughout the period, from 598 in 1776 to 1,010 in 1830, with the highest increase between 1810 and 1820. This increase was in spite of an important immigration episode in the 1790s when families removed to the newly opened areas in New York, Vermont, and Canada.

Early in the period the town established a subscription library. Like so many other towns, the period's end brought conflict between Unitarian and Trinitarian factions within the First Parish church. The Unitarians retained control of the meetinghouse while 74 withdrew to form an Evangelical church.

C. Settlement Pattern

A small village developed along the roads leading north and west of the second meetinghouse (1815), with a few high-style residences. Otherwise, dispersed agricultural settlement continues.

D. Economic Base

During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, agriculture was the primary activity of the town's residents. A high proportion, 80.6%, of the town's land was unimproved and woodlot in 1784, with an additional 6.6% classed as unimprovable. An average percentage of the land was under tillage, 2.7%, with lower figures of meadow and mowing land, 5.7%, and of pasturage, 4.4%. As in neighboring New Braintree, dairying was becoming more important than cattle and hog-raising for meat, with cheese production exceeding 100,000 lbs. annually. Most manufacturing activities during this period were directly related to agriculture or compatible with the agricultural schedule. In 1795 two sawmills, two gristmills, and a fulling mill operated in the town. By the early 1830s, two tanneries and a plough manufacturer had been established. Three palm-leaf hat dealers managed more than 50 women working in their homes, providing them with the palm leaves and marketing the finished hats. In 1832 more than 20,000 hats were made. The only exception to this pattern of work was a small cotton mill established in Coldbrook Springs before 1830.

E. Architecture

Residential: A significant number of late 18th century "capes," mostly five bays wide, but some three- and four-bay examples and some so altered as to be unrecognizable as to the original fenestration. Also, a significant number of two-story, center chimney plans from the period, almost all seemingly five bays wide. Two double-pile, two-story, five-bay, double chimney houses are recorded, one known to date from the fourth quarter of the

18th century. Also, one single-story, five-bay structure, apparently a double-chimney form. One rear wall chimney house was noted in the field (much altered).

Institutional: A new meetinghouse (Congregational) was erected in 1814. This building, originally one-story, measured 50 x 40 feet. The structure was enlarged in 1845 by raising it to two stories (town hall occupied first floor) and extending part of the gable end facade so that the church now has a definite Greek Revival character. The three-bay center entry is recessed between projecting "flankers" which were built out in 1845 to the Doric columns. The church has a square tower with a truncated spire. The 1845 alterations also involved moving the structure slightly west of its 1814 location and turning it to face westward.

A 1790 brick school is located on the north side of the Old Turnpike Road near the junction with Scott Road. The 1828 brick school in the center was raised to two stories in 1836-37, converted to a carriage house in 1840, had a frame addition to the rear in 1859, and now appears as a two-story, three-bay, pyramidal-roofed, side-passage plan with a central chimney.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes

The early 19th century roads continued in use, with the addition of the County Road from Barre to Rutland through Coldbrook Springs in the northeast.

B. Population

During the first twenty years of the period the growth trend established earlier continued, expanding from 1,010 in 1830 to 1,137 in 1850. Thereafter began a long downward trend, reaching 860 in 1870. Throughout the period, foreign-born population remained small, under 5%, and included Irish, English, and Canadians. Agriculture remained dominant, with fewer than a third the men employed in manufacturing as farming. An almshouse appeared briefly in 1860. The town supported a number of familiar voluntary associations, including a Library Association (1848), a Lyceum (1851), Debating Association (1856), and Franklin Literary Society (1858). In a parallel development, the town instituted a high school in 1851. The Evangelical and Unitarian churches were reunited during the first decade of the period, while Baptists met in Coldbrook, and later the Methodists met in the center.

C. Settlement Pattern

Some residential additions were made in the villages west of the meetinghouse. In 1843, a former Baptist church from Rutland was moved to the center and used as the Methodist Episcopal church until 1864, after which it was converted to a cheese factory. In the northeast, Coldbrook Springs develops as a mineral springs

resort and as a small industrial center, with most development along the Coldbrook/County Road corridor.

D. Economic Base

Although several new manufacturing enterprises appeared in Oakham during the 1840s and 1850s, agriculture remained the leading economic activity for most of the town's residents. Cheese dominated dairy production on the farm until the late 1860s, when a cheese factory was established and centralized production in a factory in the town center. By 1875 production exceeded 100,000 lbs. valued at more than \$21,000. Butter-making and sales of whole milk were gaining importance by the early 1870s. Whole milk production and sales increased from 6,000 gallons in 1865 to nearly 30,000 gallons in 1875, while butter production rose from 13,000 to 32,000 lbs. during the same period. The increased focus on dairying meant more land was devoted to hay and pasture, while the cultivation of corn and other grains declined by as much as 50% between the 1840s and the 1870s.

The manufacturing sector of Oakham's economy remained small and, for the most part, was carried out in small shops or in the home. Wood and metal working predominated after the 1840s, but during the 1830s and 1840s leather tanning and boot and shoe making were the leading activities. In 1845 nearly 70 men produced 3,800 boots and shoes and bottomed 70,000 pairs of shoes, work probably put out from the large North Brookfield or Spencer shops. Woodworking consisted of a small chair and cabinet shop, a carriage shop, cooper shop (which made meat casks and powderkegs), a shop that built waterwheels, at least three sawmills, and two mills that made sashes, doors, and blinds.

Metal working establishments included a small shop that manufactured ploughs, seed drills, and cultivators from the 1830s to the 1850s, several blacksmith shops, a stove foundry, and a wire goods manufactory which produced sieves, dishcovers, corn poppers, and rat traps. In 1865 this was the leading industry, employing 36 men and women who produced \$22,000 worth of goods. The wire was probably obtained from the wire manufactories of neighboring Spencer.

The cotton mill at Coldbrook Springs was converted to a satinet mill by 1837. The operation remained very small, with only six power looms and a handful of employees. In 1845, only 600 yards of satinet were produced, and by the end of the decade, the mill was closed. Coldbrook Springs, however, was a thriving small village by the late 1860s, containing the Cold Spring House, a hotel/boarding house for visitors built next to a sulphur spring and an iron spring with a bath house; a blacksmith shop; a store, post office, and billiard hall; a machine shop; a box mill; and at least ten houses.

E. Architecture

Residential: A major decline in the number of period buildings that survive which must reflect to some extent the population figures for the period. Scattered examples of center and double chimney forms, but the most common house type is the gable-end, side-passage plan of three bays. Most of these appear to date from the first half of the period. Of note are two temple front, three-bay houses dating from ca. 1836. One has a Doric portico supporting an extended pediment and sheltering a flushboard facade. Parallel pilasters and a Gothic blind in the attic are significant details. The second is similar in form, but has double-mullioned sidelights and a Gothic traceried fanlight in the attic.

Institutional: The Methodists purchased the Baptist church from Coldbrook Springs in 1840 and moved it to Oakham Center. The two-story frame structure has a five-bay, gable-end flushboarded facade with a center entry. Pilasters are at the corners of the building which originally measured 46 x 36 feet. The Methodist church dissolved in 1863, and the following year the church was sold and converted to a cheese factory. In 1908, the building was converted into housing and is still used for that purpose. East and West Center schools were erected in 1836-37.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes

The 19th century roads continued to be used. In 1873, the Ware River Railroad opened service just across the border from Coldbrook Springs in Barre. In 1887, the Central Massachusetts Railroad opens service across the northeast corner of town, passing north of Muddy Pond, with a station at Coldbrook Springs. No streetcar service is established in town.

B. Population

Throughout this period, the town's population continued to shrink, from 860 in 1870 to a low of 519 in 1905, followed by small temporary gains during the final decade. Within the total, the percentage of foreign-born fluctuated between 8% and 10%, before rising to 12% in 1915. Still, the total numbers were well under 100, and included the Irish, increasing number of French Canadians and Nova Scotians, plus small numbers of Poles. Agriculture remained the overwhelming source of employment, particularly as manufacturing dropped from just over 100 to only 32 males in 1915.

The town maintained its school districts, but maintained a graded school at the center and sent high school age students to neighboring towns. Tramps increased in numbers and the town reestablished an almshouse from 1876-1885. At that time it joined with neighbors to form a Poor Farm Association and finally joined Charlton's Association in 1910.

C. Settlement Pattern

Several structures were added to the central village, including Memorial Hall (1874), Forbes Memorial Library (1908), and a building housing a store and post office (1908). Resort activity continued at Coldbrook Springs, stimulated by period railroad connections, and an additional cluster of houses was built at the Pine Road/County Road intersection. Significant farmstead abandonment occurred.

D. Economic Base

Nonagricultural activities in Oakham remained limited through the end of the century. Shoe bottoming, carried on largely in home workshops and by farmers, continued into the late 1870s or early 1880s before mechanization and centralization in the shoe factories of North Brookfield and Spencer ended the practice of putting out work. Wheelwrighting, carriage-making, blacksmithing, the manufacture of boxes and cutting of lumber, wire goods manufacturing, the manufacture of cooking, lighting, and heating apparatus, a small printing and bookbinding firm, and a manufactory of polishes and dressings operated in the town between the Civil War and World War I. The cheese factory closed by the early 1880s as Oakham's farmers turned almost totally to butter and milk production.

Grains, vegetables, and most production continued to be important, though the quantity and value of all three declined sharply after the 1880s, as dairying dominated agricultural activity. Milk production increased tenfold between 1875 and 1895 and hay and pasture land also rose in acreage. Poultry and fruit became along with milk production, signalling a greater emphasis on commercial agriculture by the 1880s and 1905.

E. Architecture

Residential: No significant development observed.

Institutional: Memorial Hall, a two-and-a-half-story, three-bay, gable-end, side-entry structure, was erected in 1874 north of the meetinghouse to function as both the town hall and a school. The building displays some elements of Stick Style ornamentation.

Two more schools were erected in the last quarter of the 19th century, both of which are now residences.

In 1907 the Forbes Memorial Library, a one-story, three-bay, center entry, fieldstone structure with a flared hip roof, was constructed from a design by Fuller & Delano.

Commercial: In 1908, the two-story, gable store and post office was constructed in the center.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes

The Central Massachusetts Railroad is abandoned. The County Road in the northeast from Barre to Rutland is improved as part of Route 122.

B. Population

Very little information available on the small farming community. Population figures continued to shrink, from 527 in 1915 to 423 in 1940. The foreign-born accounted for 14% of the population. The town had 55.6% of its population classified as rural, third highest in the county after New Braintree and Hubbardston.

C. Settlement Pattern

Little change occurred in the central village. The Coldbrook Springs settlement is removed with the installation of the Quabbin aqueduct for the upper Ware River, as part of the Metropolitan Water System. Some cottage development occurs on the west side of Dean Pond, and to a lesser degree around Browning Pond.

D. Economic Base

Oakham's economy was based almost entirely on agriculture during the period between the wars, as most of its surviving small industries closed. Dairying was the major agricultural activity, with orcharding, poultry, and vegetables also important.

E. Architecture

Scattered examples of popular early 20th century dwellings are found. A cluster of ca. 1930 houses stretches along Spencer Road just south of the center, and 1930s-1940s cottages/residences area located on North Brookfield Road at Deans Pond.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

The inventory of 94 buildings adequately reflects the building patterns of Oakham.

XII. SOURCES