

# MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

## SHREWSBURY

Report Date: 1983

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.



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](http://www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc)  
[mhc@sec.state.ma.us](mailto:mhc@sec.state.ma.us) / 617-727-8470

## MHC TOWN RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

TOWN: Shrewsbury

DATE: February 1983

### I. TOPOGRAPHY

Shrewsbury is located at the western edge of the lowlands plateau which forms the eastern portion of Worcester County. Elevations range from nearly 400 feet above sea level at Lake Quinsigamond, a four mile long bow-shaped lake which forms the boundary between the city of Worcester and Shrewsbury, to 755 feet on Rawson Hill in the north central portion of town. This range of highland extends southward through the middle portion of the town from Rawson Hill, descending on the eastern side of town to the Assabet River in Northborough and Westborough.

The glacially-formed surface is uneven and hilly, cut by a number of minor streams which provided several small water power sites. Soils are generally sandy loams, containing varied quantities of gravel and stones, in some cases inhibiting cultivation but well-suited for pasturage, dairying, and orcharding.

### II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Established as a town in 1727. Numerous 18th century boundary changes with Lancaster, Grafton, Westborough. Part established as Boylston in 1786.

### III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

A suburban, central upland community, on an historic east-west corridor, with possible native sites at Newton Pond, Jordan Pond and Lake Quinsigamond. Permanent settlement after 1717, with first meetinghouse site established 1721. Dispersed 18th century agricultural development, with much of Federal period central village intact. Early 19th century industrial activity in tanning, boot and shoe production, and light manufacturing, but lack of major waterpower sites and railroad connections prevents further industrial development. Orchard production, dairying and market gardening remain major activities through the 19th century. Significant streetcar and early automobile suburban development from Worcester in early 20th century. Continued intensive post-war suburban expansion with commercial strip development on Route 9. Continued development likely given town's location at edge of regional industrial growth core and on I-290 corridor. Industrial development in the southeast threatens last remaining large scale dairy landscapes.

### IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

#### A. Transportation Routes:

Primary east-west route the Connecticut Path following Main Street. Conjectured southern alternative following South Street to sites on Westborough border, and north/south route following Grafton Road and Big Bummet Brook.

B. Settlement Pattern:

Extension of Charlestown Meadow site in adjacent Westborough in south-east corner; reported camps along Big Bummet; other sites probably located on knolls overlooking Lake Quinsigamond and other ponds in the east.

C. Subsistence Base:

Seasonal fishing on ponds and brooks, hunting and gathering, as well as agriculture on adjacent areas.

D. Observations:

Little information on this area but regional patterns suggest Nipmucks in low density exploiting freshwater resources with more permanent camps to the east and west.

V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Same as during Contact Period.

B. Population:

Native population diminished with formation of nearby praying towns. Persistent raids on nearby Lancaster curtailed colonial settlement to the west and south. Grants to individuals from the General Court to land in this vicinity: the largest, known as Haynes Farm, consisted of 3200 acres on either side of the Main Street (1664); smaller grants, primarily in Boylston, lay to the north: Malden (1662), Rawson (1686), and Sewall ( ). No settlement of those grants during this period.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Continued seasonal use by Native Population, but no evidence of colonial occupation.

D. Economic Base:

Same as during Contact Period.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Location of period structures indicates continued use of native paths, elaborated to reach dispersed farms and neighboring settlements: north-south include Walnut Street, Prospect-Reservoir Streets, Boylston Circle, and Gull Street. Connecticut Path route changed from north to south of Lake Quinsigamond from 1683 to 1726.

B. Population:

Thirty subscribers petition for incorporation in 1717; forty-five houselots assigned at same time, but not all settled. Primarily settled from Sudbury and Marlborough. First permanent settler Gerhom Wheeler (1720) on Boylston near Hill Street. Church gathered by 16 men, nine women in 1723. By 1765 population of 1401, includes Boylston and most of West Boylston.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Multiple owners of the Haynes Farm petition for township status, and earlier settlers located in this area on either side of Main Street. Division of houselots in dispersed farmsteads of 50-70 acres, with additional meadowlands and four subsequent divisions. Municipal structures cluster on Main route south of geographic center, including meetinghouse (1722, 1766), school (ca. 1728), burying ground (1730), pound (1746) and parsonage. By 1743 population in the north requires the formation of a 2nd precinct (Boylston).

D. Economic Base:

Primarily agricultural, with apples and other orchard products particularly notable. Taverns located on Main Street, in center and to the east, as well as on Walnut Street, by mid-century. Growing poverty during 18th century, particularly with expenses of the Revolution.

E. Architecture:

Residential: The earliest recorded settlement is that of Gersham Wheelock in ca. 1716/1717; his one-story, four-bay center chimney house survives and is located north of the town center on the west side of the (?) Road. Aside from this, no other dwellings appear to survive from the first half of the 18th century. The predominant house form is the two-story, five-bay center chimney plan with the double chimney form developing in the latter part of the century. One exception, however, is the brick two-story, five-bay double chimney with a hip-on-hip roof dwelling built in 1756 by Nathaniel Allen of Boston. The house (demolished in 1852) revealed Allen's awareness of fashionable Boston designs in its use of a center passage, dormer windows, and a broken arch pediment over the central entrance.

Institutional: First meetinghouse is built in 1721 on common. By 1728, a schoolhouse is located in the town center, and ca. 1742 school squadrons are formed. In 1766, Daniel Hemenway constructs the second meetinghouse, 55' x 43'.

Commercial: By 1750, two stores are located at the town center, and four taverns are in operation during this period. In 1725, Nahum Ward builds on Main Street east of the town center and west of Walnut Street the two-story, five-bay center chimney tavern with pedimented entrances (later known as Bladwin Tavern; demolished). Farrar's Tavern (in 1799 it became Pease's Tavern)

is a similar five-bay center chimney plan built in 1751 and located at Main and Walnut, east of the town center on the road to Westborough (Walnut Street). Cushing's Tavern (Haven's Tavern in 1808) was in operation by the time of the Revolution and is recorded as being the largest tavern in town: a two-story, ten-bay structure with a six-bay recessed wing and three pedimented entrances like those of the Ward/Baldwin building of 1725. The construction date of the Batch Dean Tavern on the turnpike at Walnut Street is unknown, but the building was used as a smallpox hospital in 1792. A fifth tavern was operated by Pratt on Lake Quinsigamond.

## VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

### A. Transportation Routes:

The colonial roads radiating from the meetinghouse center continued to be used. Three principal highways exist: the Post Road from Boston to Worcester (Main Street), the road from Northwest Worcester County (Malden Street), which joins Main Street 1 and 1/2 miles west of the meetinghouse, and the north-south road to Providence (Boylston Street/Grafton Road) which passes by the center. In 1800, the Holden Road is improved as the eastern terminus of the 6th Massachusetts Turnpike (to Amherst). In 1810, the Boston/Worcester Turnpike is constructed through the southern half of town, with bridge construction over Lake Quinsigamond.

### B. Population:

Population in 1776 is 1475, but drops with the establishment of Boylston as a separate town in 1786. It then rises from 1790 (936) to 1820 (1458), then drops slightly in 1830 (1386). Decade of greatest growth, 1810-1820 (+248). Baptist Society organizes 1813, meetinghouse built 1814.

Congregational schism leads to formation of liberal First Restoration Society in 1821 with many prominent members from outside the town. Strong local support of Shay's Rebellion. Agricultural Associates of Shrewsbury formed 1815, merges with Worcester group to form Worcester County Agricultural Society in 1818.

### C. Settlement Pattern:

The Post Road east of the meetinghouse develops as a commercial-residential-industrial focus. By the early 1790s, stores locate on Main Street and a manufactory/tanning nucleus is forming at Hop Brook. High style residences begin to line the street between the meetinghouse and the "Lower Village" to the east. In 1807 the meetinghouse is modernized with steeple and belfry additions. Two newly formed religious organizations move out of the center, the Baptists (1813) southwest on Maple Avenue, and the Restorationists (1821) to the Turnpike/Grafton Street intersection, where a small, secondary settlement nucleus begins to form.

#### D. Economic Base:

The primary economic activity of Shrewsbury's residents centered on agriculture and its by-products though several small manufacturing enterprises began. As early as 1780 Luther Goddard began making brass clocks; in 1809 he established a small factory in town employing a few skilled Swiss and English watchmakers. In 1817 the operation moved to Worcester where it successfully expanded. Gun-smithing was introduced into Shrewsbury in 1797 by John Mason. By 1818 five small manufacturers were operating, producing rifles, shotguns, and pistols. Skilled metalworking was also carried out in a cutlery factory established during the 1820s at the intersection of Bummet Brook and the Boston and Worcester Turnpike.

The most important and profitable industry in Shrewsbury's later economic development, the leather industry, began in 1786 with the establishment of a tannery in Lower Village. Supported by the large cattle herds of local and area farms, the industry grew steadily. Nymphas Pratt erected a new tannery and carrying establishment at Lower Village around 1810; he was very successful, becoming in 1836 the principal founder of the Citizens Bank in Worcester. Paralleling the growth of tanning and currying was boot and shoe manufacturing, begun about 1823, and harness manufacturing. By 1832 shoemaking dominated manufactures, employing 135 persons in the production of shoes, largely brogans for slave wear, valued at more than \$55,000. At this time the work was still done largely in the home or in small shops. Also manufactured in the home were palm leaf hats and straw bonnets, employing nearly 80 women and girls in 1832.

Another industry that expanded was the lumber and wood products trade. The number of sawmills grew from two in 1794 to six in 1830; in 1832 there were also two chair and cabinet makers, wagon and plow manufacturers, who produced over 100 wagons and 650 plows per year.

#### E. Architecture:

Residential: The two-story, five-bay, double chimney, hipped-roof house is the most common type. End chimneys were not unknown, yet the center chimney was still in use. Brick houses begin to appear in small numbers. The tavern experienced its largest growth spurt between 1810-1820, and this is evident in the Federal development along Main Street east and west of the center.

Institutional: Post Office located in center in 1804. Steeple and belfry added to second meetinghouse (1766) in 1807. Baptist church is organized in 1814; Restoration Society formed in 1820 and meetinghouse erected (1822) at South Shrewsbury (dissolved 1868).

Commercial: By 1814 James Hamilton's Inn is in operation. Harrington's Tavern likely to have opened in this period at South Shrewsbury on the turnpike.

**Industrial:** Town is primarily agricultural; scattered small industries include clock and watch making (ca. 1780); rifle production (ca. 1797); boot-making center at Lower Village east of center on Main Street in early 19th century, a tannery was located on east Main Street by 1830 and the C.O. Green & CO. Leather Factory occupied buildings at Lower Village.

**F. Observations:**

The rapid fall of prices for agricultural goods, a shortage of hard currency, and general economic depression following the Revolutionary War affected many of the farmers of Worcester and Bristol Counties, among them the farmers of Shrewsbury. When Daniel Shays, the leader of an agrarian "revolt" in 1786 termed "Shays' Rebellion", led an attempt to close the courts to prevent debt collection and foreclosure of mortgages, Shrewsbury became a staging area and encampment of the more than 400 insurgents prior to their march on the Worcester Courthouse.

**VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)**

**A. Transportation Routes:**

The early 19th century road network remains in use. No railway passes through town, the closest line being the Boston and Albany (1835) tracks across the southern border of town.

**B. Population:**

Population increases slowly from 1830 (1386) to 1855 (1636). There is a slight decrease 1855-1860 (-78), then a slight increase in the 1860s (+52) to 1610 in 1870. Foreign-born population 1190 in 1865. Baptist society (1835), First Restoration Society (1868) dissolved. Methodist Church formed (1846).

**C. Settlement Patterns:**

Expansion and infilling continues in center. Meetinghouse moved 50 feet south in 1834. The Grafton Street/Main Street intersection emerges as the commercial focus, with residences extending west on Main Street beyond Maple Avenue. New residential section south of the center on Wesleyan Street. Village settlement extends east on Main Street to the South Street intersection, where the manufacturing focus remains.

**D. Economic Base:**

Although the value of manufactured goods increased more than three-fold between the start and finish of this period, the number and range of manufacturing establishments actually showed a decrease. The manufacture of cutlery ceased by 1837; by 1855 production of fur and wool hats, palm leaf hats, straw bonnets, chair and cabinet-making had also ceased. However, the

introduction of clothing manufacture, employing 175 persons by 1837, and the expansion of tanning, currying, and boot and shoe making contributed to an overall expansion of manufacturing employment and value by mid-century. Though boot and shoe making and clothing manufacture declined by more than 75% in the next quarter century, there were still four small boot and shoe shops and a boot counter and stiffening manufactory in 1870.

The leather industry continued to expand despite the decline in shoe production, and accounted for sales of \$425,000 in 1875, more than 90% of the town's total value of manufacture goods that year. Nearly 50 workmen were employed by the firm of Nelson and Rice of Lower Village, which also owned and operated tanyards in Chester, Windhendon, and Gilsum, New Hampshire.

The growth of nearby Worcester maintained the demand for lumber and cordwood, keeping the town's five sawmills active. Shrewsbury's agriculture was also stimulated. In the early decades of the period market wagons made regular weekly runs to Boston. However, after about 1845, Worcester was found to be a better and nearer market, and every farmer would be his own marketman. Market gardens of vegetables, orchards, and dairies expanded. Milk production increased nearly four-fold between 1865 and 1875, and together with butter and cheese accounted for nearly 30% of the value of agricultural production .

Towards mid-century a new market for agricultural produce appeared, one which continued to expand into the next century: the summer resort population which increasingly visited the shores of Lake Quinsigamond.

#### E. Architecture:

Residential: Primary development concentrated at town center and seen in the five-bay and sidehall plan dwellings of the Greek Revival period which appear along Main Street west of the Common and south of the center along South and Walnut Streets, probably attributable to leather industry. Popular styles of the after portion of the period are concentrated south of the center along Maple Avenue and Route 140.

Commercial: Haven Tavern continues to operate as resort hotel until the end of the period; hotel established on West Main by 1870. Engine house built across from common before 1857.

Institutional: two-story gambler end brick schoolhouse on common dated 1830 (appears later, 1850?). Methodist Church on southwest corner of Main and Route 140 (1847). High school classes held during 1855-1858.

Industrial: No significant industrial development: remains heavily agricultural.



## IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

### A. Transportation Routes:

The 19th century road network continues to be used. By the early 1900s two electric streetcar lines pass through town. The first runs along the turnpike road, then on Maple Avenue to the center, then on Main Street at Northborough. A branch line runs down the east side of Lake Quinsigamond. In addition, the Boston-Worcester Interurban Line (1903) passes primarily on a new east-west right-of-way north and south of the turnpike road, with intact station of turnpike/trolley line intersection.

### B. Population:

Population declines from 1870 (1610) to 1885 (1450), then rises regularly through the rest of the period, with a sharp increase (+848) to 2794 from 1900 to 1915. Eighty-one Irish, 72 Canadians in 1875; 67 Irish, 47 French Canadians in 1885. Small, but diverse foreign-born population in 1905, with 70 Irish, 40 Swedes, 36 English, 29 French Canadians, 27 Italians, and 20 Finns.

### C. Settlement Patterns:

Little expansion before streetcar line development, then significant single family development along streetcar lines, particularly over the last five years of the period. Possible concentrations include South Quinsigamond Avenue and Fairlawn.

### D. Economic Base:

In 1875 eleven establishments remained producing goods worth \$461,732; by 1905 only five establishments remained producing goods valued at only \$59,320. The steady decline of the leather industry, including boots and shoes, accounted for this tremendous decrease. Other types of manufacturing present on a very small scale in the late 19th century included clockmaking, carriage and wagon-making, and metal goods.

Agriculture became the dominant occupation with the value of agricultural goods valued at \$347,000 in 1905, the eighth highest value in Worcester County. Dairying accounted for nearly 35% of this total, while poultry and fruit cultivation each accounted for more than 10%. Greenhouses were erected by vegetable farmers allowing for year-round cultivation of plants.

Shrewsbury's major drawback to increased manufacturing was a lack of large waterpower site and the absence of a railroad or electric railway as late as 1890. Although a permanent causeway had been built over Lake Quinsigamond in 1860, new economic development did not occur. It is also likely that the development of the Lake Quinsigamond shores in Shrewsbury as a resort for Worcester inhibited the location of new industry in the area.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Scattered modest Italianate and Colonial Revival north of center, typical early 20th century four-square houses noted in southeast section of town; 1890 advertisement for sale of large farm with house of "colonial style" (Colonial Revival?) and numerous outbuildings ( ) indicates probable existence of similar large late 19th century farm complexes.

Institutional: Town hall erected in 1872 (non-existent); Catholic church (1873); high school erected (1883); Natural History Camp founded at Lake Quinsigamond (1885); Washington Social Club, a two-story Queen Anne structure with pyramidal roof, corner towers, and porches (on Lake Quinsigamond?).

Commercial: Highland Farm House (in center?), a three-story, seven-bay gabled structure with a two-story four-bay wing opens in 1890. Lake Quinsigamond developed as a resort: Island House, three-story, hipped roof Italianate hotel; Lincoln Park with bandstand, bathhouses, and swan boats; Colburn's Boat Shop. Evidence of brick commercial blocks in town center.

Industrial: Still primarily an agricultural community; only major industry is C.O. Green & CO. leather factory at Lower Village (east of town center).

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Local streetcar lines are abandoned by 1920s, and interurban line in 1931. Local roads improved as automobile highways, with Main Street/Maple Street becoming part of the major east-west Boston Worcester Road (Yellowstone Trail, Route 5, Route 20) in the 1920s. In 1930-31, the old Boston-Worcester Turnpike is improved as a major east-west, four-lane highway (Route 9) and soon after the Route 20 Southwest Connector is constructed through the southern part of town. North-south through roads are Route 140 (Grafton Street/Boylston Street) and Route 70 (Worcester/Boylston).

B. Population:

With suburban expansion from Worcester, population more than doubles over the period to 1940 (7586). Greatest growth, 1920-1925 (+2111).

C. Settlement Pattern:

Continued streetcar suburb development, with lakeside cottages ethnic clubs, and recreational areas along South Quinsigamond Avenue. Significant bungalow housing tract (Fairlawn) along streetcar line south of turnpike. Possible development along Maple Avenue and Main Street east of School Street. With abandonment of streetcar routes, suburbanization continues, mostly expanding from existing areas, although a possible distinctive early auto

suburb is the tract west of the Lake Street/Grafton Street intersection. Some period road-side survivals remain on the Route 20/Southwest Connector Corridor, the most remarkable being a 1930s diner sign near the Route 20/Route 9 intersection.

D. Economic Base:

There is little information regarding Shrewsbury's economy during this period. Manufacturing seems to have diminished further so as to be insignificant in the view of census takers. Agriculture and the resort industry were the mainstays of Shrewsbury's economy, continuing to provide recreation and foodstuffs for the population of Worcester.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Period characterized by scattered bungaloid dwellings with fieldstone foundation of teens and twenties; appears to have been concentration of modest cottages of this type in vicinity of Lake Quinsigamond on fringes of a 1940s-1950s development (Fairlawn).

Institutional: Two-story Colonial Revival brick library with Richardsonian arched entry (1903); brick firehouse on common (1927).

Commercial: Two brick commercial blocks dated 1916 and 1925 in center.

Industrial: No apparent development; remained agricultural community.