

# MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

## CANTON

Report Date: 1979

**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: December 1979

Community: Canton

## I. TOPOGRAPHY

Located on gradually rising uplands, from meadow and marsh along Neponset River on west to rugged highlands of Blue Hills (north) and Sharon Hills (south). Much tillable ground along Neponset. Intermediate elevations are rough and irregular and contain numerous ponds and upland bogs. Drainage generally west to Neponset elevation differential and numerous brooks provide excellent water power potential.

## II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Part of Dorchester "New Grant" (1636), became South Precinct of Dorchester, 1715. Incorporated as town of Stoughton, 1726, and later subdivided into three parishes: First (now Canton), Second (now Sharon) and Third (now Stoughton). First parish incorporated in Town of Canton, 1797.

## III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW:

Extremely important as suburban industrial town of Boston, with junction of trail and highway system around Blue Hills. Site of Indian Plantation at Punkapoag, early iron manufacture and Revere copper mills with historically significant early railroad viaduct and depot, with early airport facility -- all Canton Junction, several good examples of 19th century industrial structures including early stone mill, and several unique residential architectural examples in original Canton Center. A rich variety of sites and structures from all periods in landscapes little disturbed by suburban development.

## IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500 - 1620)

### A. Transportation Routes:

The area was an important focal point of trails from the south over and around the Blue Hills (Massachusetts). Documented trails include the important "Path" to Taunton around the Neponset Marshes. Blue Hills and Punkapoag Pond as Green-Green Lodge Sts and the axis of Washington St from Punkapoag to Canton Village. Branches are conjectured from Punkapoag Pond south along York St to Beaver Swamp in Avon and a possible trail from Punkapoag north to Hoosic Whisik (Houghton's) Pond and over the Blue Hills along Hillside St (Milton) although no present evidence exists.

B. Settlement Pattern: A few documented sites from the period; mostly light and scattered occupational evidence. Preferred locations are glacial outwash features adjacent to Neponset marshlands and headwater ponds.

### C. Subsistence Pattern:

Several important resources available: migratory waterfowl ("Fowl" Meadows along Neponset), seasonal runs of anadranous fish, ponds for winter ice fishing, major quarry sites in Blue Hills area - source for felsite and slate for implements.

D. Observation:

With extensive and varied resources, an area well-suited to aboriginal needs. Accessible to coastal tribes for seasonal hunting, gathering and fishing as well as inland winter refuge sites. Site potential should be considered high.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620 - 1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trail system remains in use as Colonial highways, especially the post road to Taunton - Washington St from Blue Hills - Punkapoag south.

B. Population:

Primarily native population at Ponkapoag Plantation. Indian Praying Town 1657; Christianized Neponset Indians; no English settlers prior to King Philip's War. Only 12 families, 1668.

C. Settlement:

Major settlement was Ponkapoag Planation, second of the native "praying towns," built for Christianized natives in effort to convert them to European style of living. Established by Dorchester, 1657, 6,000 acres in size. Exact location not known - on high ground west of Punkapoag Pond. Little European settlement during period. Small fort built to protect plantation, 1675.

D. Economic Base:

Agriculture, grazing and fishing. Cedar cut and split into clapboard and shingles for export to Boston and other towns (Gookin, 1972, p. 184).

E. Architecture:

No known buildings extant; garrison house built by English (ca. 1675), later demolished, location unknown.

F. Observations:

One of few areas where native settlement remained a prominent feature in the landscape during this period. Site potential - any evidence of Ponkapoag Plantation would be very significant - no archaeological evidence for any Praying Town presently exists.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1676 - 1776)

A. Transportation Routes:

Primary routes from First Settlement remain, especially Washington St axis from Blue Hill south. New set of roads laid out to meetinghouse on Pankeen Plain (Canton Center) in 1720s-1730s including Pleasant St to Stoughton, Randolph St to Braintree secondary system developed from S. Branch Neponset mill site (Canton Village) in early 18th century

including Chapman St to meetinghouse, Walpole and High Sts to Sharon. Other local roads of period include Indian Lane from York St in Ponkapoag Plantation and cartways to Neponset Marshes.

B. Population:

Native population dwindled steadily throughout period. Bolstered somewhat by infusion of blocks during mid-18th century. By 1706, about twenty families, either "squatters" or leasing land from Ponkapoag. Sporadic arrival of English settlers in late 17th century; English outnumber Indian planters by early 18th century; by 1754 a small Anglican congregation was established, although most of its members left during the Revolution.

C. Settlement:

Initial focus was Ponkapoag Village, west of Ponkapoag Pond and probably original plantation settlement (Washington St burying ground, pre-1707). Second locus of settlement developed on "Packeen Plain" (Washington and Pleasant Sts) and along East Branch of Neponset. Settlement due to milling potential and good farm land. Several taverns along N/S route (Washington St) in 1700-1715. First meetinghouse on Packeen Plain, 1716. Ponkapoag declined as population center, while Packeen Plain becomes new focal point, later called Canton Corner. By 1730, several mills and ironworks along East Branch plus several more taverns. New meetinghouse, 1748. First school, 1760.

D. Economic Base:

Initially agriculture, grazing and fishing along Neponset plus winter lumbering. Water power potential soon led to extensive milling. First sawmill on East Branch Neponset before 1700 (Thomas Holman); its dam created Forge Pond. By 1730, half a dozen other sawmills. Neponset known as Sawmill River. First grist mill, 1717 (Danforth Bros.); later site of Reeve works. First iron smelting mill, 1717. By 1727, four operating iron works using ore from Massapoag. Besides Neponset, several saw and grist mills on other brooks. Pequid Brook dammed before 1720 creating Reservoir Pond.

E. Architecture:

Known extant structures are almost entirely houses, with some possible barns; two-story central chimney houses appear to be the most common house-type, in general houses of this type are located in clusters at Ponkapoag Village, Canton Corner and in scattered locations along Washington Street. Central chimney Cape Cod cottages are also common, particularly on secondary roads away from the village centers. Most houses of this period bear subsequent alterations, most frequently in the Greek Revival and Federalist styles. One example of end chimney Georgian with high pyramidal roof.

F. Observations:

Development of town center refocuses road network and settlement pattern to Canton Center. Combination of milling potential and access to both inland resources and coastal markets cause rapid growth. Though designated as native territory (reservation), too valuable to remain as such.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775 - 1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Colonial highway network remained intact along Washington St axis linking village settlements. Turnpikes extended from Boston area (Milton) south to Stoughton, including main route from Blue Hills as Turnpike St (Route 138) in 1806 and secondary branch from Randolph as High St in SE corner - portions of which retain original width. Cross links established from Canton Village in early 19th century include Bolivar St.

B. Population:

Growth of population occurred between 1800 and 1830, including a small number (30) of foreign-born residents; founding of new religious congregations included Baptists (1812), Universalists (1819) and Evangelical Congregational (1828).

C. Settlement Location:

Shifted southward from Canton Corner to Canton Village (also known as South Canton) where three residential clusters developed around (1) the Revere Copper Works (Washington and Neponset Streets), (2) around the site of the Neponset Cotton Mill (Neponset and Walpole Streets) and (3) around Washington and High Streets; some new building also occurred at Canton Corner and Ponkapoag Village.

D. Economic Base:

Agriculture still important base of activity, especially around Neponset and Blue Hill Rivers (Green St area) and Ponkapoag Pond. By 1800, iron works dominant (ore from Massapoag Pond in Sharon) with four iron forges or foundries, including Leonard & Kinsley forge (later the substantial Kinsley Iron & Machine Co.). Revere rolling mill established 1801 produced copper sheathing for nascent American navy which provided both the raw copper and substantial financial encouragement. Earliest cotton textile mill in state reputedly James Beaumont's on the East Branch, now site of 1824-25 stone Neponset Mfg. Co. mill.

E. Architecture:

Most buildings built during the Federal period appear to post-date 1800-1810. Popular house types of the period include two-story hip-roofed houses with interior end wall chimneys and center entrance facades, built in each of the town's three villages (Ponkapoag, Canton Corner and South Canton). Double houses and cottages with low-pitched roofs are more commonly found in South Canton, where some were built as workers' housing. While many houses retain simple Federal details, few appear to be architect-designed.

Industrial buildings were concentrated in South Canton, where at least one mill from this period remains (MHC - Canton Form 113). While small-scale commercial buildings and offices existed, particularly in South Canton, none appear to remain.

Institutional architecture of the period probably includes several former district schools and one Gothic Revival church built in 1822 (MHC - Canton Form # ).

F. Summary Observations:

Important development of waterpower sites with metal working tradition in South Canton area results in unique location of Paul Revere copper works and iron making. Turnpike linkages to Boston increase local prosperity with good range of period houses.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830 - 1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Existing road system served as basic network with Turnpike (Route 138), Washington and Pleasant Sts basis of system. Early railroad location on Boston-Providence corridor to Narragansett Bay around Neponset Marshes from Dedham to Sharon through Canton Village mills on viaduct (local granite) over the S. Branch Neponset designed by William McNeil in 1835. Finest early railroad structure in New England (now AMTRAK mainline). Branch to Stoughton through Canton Village (1845) creating Canton Junction with industrial spurs including horse tram to Revere Copper (c. 1865), roadbed intact.

B. Population:

Population increased by approx. 150% during period with particularly large increase (1,120) between 1840 and 1855; of this increase, 1,040 were foreign-born, including 842 Irish immigrants; after initial immigration, foreign-born population stays around 1,000 until the early 20th century, Catholic church established 1854.

C. Settlement Location:

Emergence of South Canton as commercial center of town along Washington and Neponset Streets. Central section of South Canton served as location of working-class population; slight residential segregation occurred with construction of several mill-owner and agents' houses at the north and southeast edges of South Canton, although population of area remained too small to allow clearly defined residential districts. Canton Center remained civic and residential area with church and cemetery. Punkapoag stabilized as highway village with traveler's accommodations. Last elements of Indian Plantation population on York St.

D. Economic Base:

Period of substantial industrial growth in Canton village, including expansion of both Revere and Kinsley (now controlled by Ames interests), stone Ames shovel factory on Bolivar Pond, 1840s, silk mills (result of state's offer of bounty to encourage silk manufacture), and Draper Bros. Woolen Mill at Canton Corner.

E. Architectural Character:

Modest range of period styles, with porticoed cottage Greek Revival along Washington St and limited examples of Italianate and Mansard Residential architecture of the period is located mostly in South Canton and is dominated by simple side-hall plan cottages and houses with Greek Revival, Italianate and Second Empire details; several more ambitious Italianate and Second Empire-style houses were built along Washington Street north of the Revere Works and, to a lesser degree, southeast of Bolivar Road and Washington Street; however, few of these houses remain. Large complex of period mill houses in suburban forms of mid-19th century.

Industrial buildings were concentrated in South Canton and Springdale; a range of types was present, including stone mill-buildings (Bolivar Road) and wood-frame structures (Springdale) built on water-power sites; some brick mill-buildings equipped with steam-power were built at the northern edge of South Canton after the 1850s; industrial building types varied widely depending upon types of manufacture.

Commercial building focused on South and included a variety of building types (hotel, offices, stores, etc.). Few of which are likely to have survived modern demolitions and re-modellings.

Institutional buildings consisted of a few Italianate-style public buildings and churches, nearly all of which appear to have been replaced.

F. Observations:

Important period of industrial development, especially with related metalworking in Canton Village, augmented by daily railroad link on Boston corridor. Spectacular viaduct at Canton Junction, historically important as finest early railroad structure in New England Northeast. Several period mill buildings and worker's cottages also in Canton Village.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870 - 1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Road and railroad system unchanged since mid-19th century. Street railway (trolley) lines extended from Boston into suburbs in early 1900s, south from Mattapan along Turnpike and Washington Sts to Canton Center and Canton Village with branches to Norwood along Neponset St Bridge over marshes and to Sharon along Main St.

B. Population:

Population stabilized at 4,300-4,700 after 1880 and experienced no significant growth until 1910-1915, when the town's population grew by 826, of whom approximately 300 were foreign-born; although the local Irish population declined throughout the period, it remained larger than that of other foreign-born groups.

C. Settlement Location:

Settlement location shifted, although commercial and institutional center remained at South Canton; some suburban growth occurred around Canton

Junction (Chapman Street and around Canton Corner) after the 1890s; in the early 20th century, estates began to appear in the northern part of the town, around the base of the Great Blue Hill, in general, South Canton contained the town's immigrant population, while northern and western sections were dominated by Yankees.

D. Economic Base:

Industrial contraction on former water mill sites and highway craft shops in Canton Village, although primary sites remain active, notably Revere Copper and Draper. Specialized agriculture as dairying on good upland around Punkapoag. Railroad facilities expanded at Canton Junction.

Heyday of the silk industry in Canton in the 1880s (several surviving elements) though companies dispersed by 1900s. Knitted carpet lining invented by Townsend and manufactured near Canton Corner. Morse Store polish factory on Washington St (still extant), which manufactured polish in paste and bars from black lead imported from Ceylon. Became a commercial success through advertising and the product became a household name across the country. The product was killed by the advent of porcelain stores in the 1890s.

By 1900, new generation of industries moved into older mill sites - manufacturers of chemicals, electrical parts, rubber cement, plastic wood. Except for Plymouth Rubber (moved into Revere plant, 1911), short-lived affairs and uses for mill sites became increasingly marginal.

A number of industries were established around the railway at Canton Junction, including manufacturers of patent leather, sizing compounds, oil cloth, powdered soap, leather blacking, automobile tires, wrapping paper, and firehoses. Several were apparently satellite ancillary companies to the shoe industry then peaking in Stoughton. None of the industries appear to have survived into the 1950s, but the location is still an active industrial area.

Early utilities included Blue Hill Electric Light Co. (now machine shop on Neponset Street) and 1888 Canton Water Works pumping station on Pine Street.

E. Architecture:

Wide range of period styles, with several good examples of Historic Revivals in estate (Blue Hill Street) and old status area (Chapman-Pleasant-Washington) with shingled Queen Anne and Colonial Revival in suburban settings. Several good period civic buildings, including brick town hall (1878 - Earle), fine neo-Classical public library (c. 1895) and outstanding Romanesque Revival railroad depot (c. 1890) at Canton Junction, with several stone boulder churches. Suburban expansion around Canton Center produces modest craftsmen-bungalow examples.

Industrial: No new complexes were built; new construction consisted mainly of the alteration of existing mills to new uses. Unique trolley stop (c. 1910) at Canton Junction.

Commercial: Continued focus on South Canton; limited building of one-story stores; exceptionally fine train station at Canton Junction (1890).



Institutional: Made up primarily of public schoolhouses and a Victorian Gothic style town hall (MHC Survey); state hospital perhaps begun late in period.

F. Observations:

Suburban expansion of high income from Boston (Milton) with local industrial decline maintains historic pattern with new links along trolley routes to Norwood and Hyde Park (Boston). Several well-preserved period civic structures, most notably railroad depot, among finest of its type in Boston area.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915 - 1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Trolley routes abandoned in 1920s with advance of autohighway system. Primary routes from Boston south along former turnpike (Route 138) and circumferential autohighway around Blue Hills (Route 128) - portions of original 1931 roadbed survive intact as Blue Hill St.

B. Population:

Growth until 1920; stable 1920-1930, limited growth 1930-1945; rapid growth 1945-1970; increases came largely from development of commuter suburbs.

C. Settlement Location:

Continued expansion of high income suburban development from Milton along Washington St axis to Canton Center. Industrial stagnation in Canton Junction retracts growth of area in 1930s, with remaining portions of town as fringe rural. Commercial focus remains at South Canton; suburban development occurring along formerly rural roads and in tracks in scattered locations.

D. Economic Base:

Industrial contraction in Canton Junction Village, but major firms remain intact during period with 19th century mill sites converted to electric power. Estate district expansion preserves agricultural landscape around Punkapoag and autohighway junction of Routes 128 and 138 (Blue Hill St) creates commercial strip south to Stoughton along former turnpike. Boston Metropolitan Airport located in Neponset Marshes in 1930s.

E. Architecture:

Dominated by the development of modest free-standing single-family houses; limited building of substantial Colonial Revival-style houses in North Canton.

Industrial: Nearly no new building; small development of one-story utilitarian buildings near Canton Junction. Fine examples of airport hangers from 1930s - Neponset Street, perhaps earliest surviving of their type in Boston area.

Commercial: Little building, mainly one-story, free-standing buildings at South Canton and near the Route 128 interchange. Good period examples of auto commercial from 1920s-1930s, with gas stations (Blue Hill St and Canton-Washington St) and corner store-variety-spa (Canton Market).

Institutional: Some school buildings; largest public buildings at State Hospital School in Colonial Revival and modern styles.

F. Observations:

Continued suburban expansion of high income development from Boston-Milton with autohighway commercial activity around Blue Hills corridor. Economic stagnation of Canton industrial sites, although continued viability of major firms. Several period estate houses, gas stations, and local stores, with potentially historic early airport facilities at Neponset Marshes.

XI. SOURCES

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