

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

CARLISLE

Report Date: 1980

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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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

mhc@sec.state.ma.us / 617-727-8470

MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

Date: March 1980

Community: Carlisle

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Located on rugged and rocky upland terrain. Higher elevations of glacially reshaped bedrock, some outwash features as well. Generally a thin, rocky soil. Some lowland marsh along Concord River, Extensive upland bog/swamp in rest of town. Watershed area with NW part of town draining into Merrimack while SE section flows into Concord.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

First district of Carlisle established 1754 from northern part of Concord (including Bloods' Farms). Second district established 1780 with addition of sections from Billerica, Acton and Chelmsford. Incorporated as Town of Carlisle, 1805.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Affluent suburban town on periphery of Boston suburban axis. Located on interior highland along Concord River with headwaters of Merrimack tributaries. Native sites suspected along Concord valley and Spencer and Mill Brooks. Early zone of English settlement from Concord and Chelmsford with several documented mid-17th century mill sites and some probable late First Period houses. Limited agricultural economy during Colonial period with formation of town center by late 18th century. Restricted industrial potential during 19th century, except for brief copper smelter operation. Town center retains well-preserved set of early 19th century structures, with several authentic period houses on outlying roads. Carlisle was beyond immediate zone of suburban expansion before mid-20th century, without railroad or street railway service. Recent growth has been regulated to preserve historic period landscapes, with careful selection of suburban development and excellent survival of original features throughout town.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Located on periphery of highlands along Concord River. Conjectured trails appear to follow north/south grain along river valley as Maple Street and River Road to east, and possibly Acton and Curve Streets to west. Other likely routes through central portion include Bedford, Concord-East Streets through town center.

B. Settlement Patterns:

No documented period sites. A few unspecified sites reported along Concord and on terraces overlooking Spencer, Pages, and Great Brooks. Additional sites likely in these areas.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Access to seasonal fish runs in Concord River. Some agricultural potential. Upland and lowland hunting/gathering.

D. Observations:

While sites are probable along Concord, uplands are too rugged for extensive period occupation. Area is on border between Nipmuck related territory (interior, freshwater ponds) and riverine-coastal orientation of Pawtucket group sites in this area could help define these groups more clearly.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails remain as highways in 17th century.

B. Population:

Small, probably a dozen families or less by end of period.

C. Settlement:

Three separate loci of early settlement: Bloods' Farms (Bedford Road south of Pages Brook) after 1653; Chelmsford "South End" (Curve Street area around Great Brook) after 1655; people from Concord focused around mill on Spencer Brook (South Street/Concord Road) after 1662. Apparently little interaction between these groups.

D. Economic Base:

Small-scale agriculture, grazing and lumbering. Mills important within each settlement area: Robert Blook, sawmill on Pages Brook about 1660; George Robbins' mill on Great Brook after 1655; James Adams' sawmill on Spencer Brook, 1662.

E. Observations:

A composite of outlying milling areas from Concord and Chelmsford (reminiscent of Walpole) and the semi-autonomous community of Blooks' Farms. No particular relationship among these. There appears to be very good potential both for First Period structures and pre-King Philip's War archaeological sites (domestic and mill).

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1676-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Location of town center by mid-18th century creates radial road pattern from meetinghouse as Bedford-Westford Roads, Concord-East-Rutland Streets, and Lowell-School-Bellows Hill Roads. Secondary roads to mill sites include Brook and Cross Streets.

B. Population:

Slow growth during 17th and early 18th century -- limited agricultural land available plus instability due to frontier warfare. Estimate of 30-40 families by 1754 with increased growth after. No specific figures available.

C. Settlement:

The three first period loci remained dominant up through 1750 with gradually more farms and roads connecting them. Momentum for a town center began in 1730's with much controversy over location. Meetinghouse built 1758 off Bedford Road -- by end of period this area began to emerge as town center.

D. Economic Base:

Agriculture and grazing -- some evidence of upland bogs being drained for pasture. Apple orchards (cider). Lumbering. Several mills: John Barrett's fulling mill, Great Brook, 1691; Adam's mill, Great Brook, 1730; Solomon Andrews' sawmill, Greenough Pond, 1757. An undated (probably 18th century) lime kiln off West Street near Spencer Brook. Several taverns: Black Mansion, Bedford and Maple Streets, 1750; Spaulding's, East Street, 1754; Old Revolutionary Tavern, Stearns Street, 1757; Red Lion, West Street, 1771.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Nearly all examples of the period seem to have been vernacular, two-storey houses of the central chimney type. At least one central-chimney cottage with a gambrel roof appears to date from the period, although local sources attribute an unlikely construction date of 1654. There is little evidence of any high-style Georgian architecture, although individual examples (related to those in Bedford) may have existed.

F. Observations:

Separatism of 17th century was overcome during 18th century as outlying but topographically related sections of Concord, Chelmsford, Billerica and Acton began to coalesce into a town. Period landscape is remarkably intact in much of the town.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Radial highways from town center remain from 18th century. Concord River bridge to Bedford in 1790s joins Bedford Road at river meadows.

B. Population:

Gradual growth until 1820, after which population declined; no foreign-born population known. Union Calvinist Society formed 1827-1830; Baptists present ca. 1824, but no congregation formed.

C. Settlement Location:

Some scattered farm houses and cottages built, major new building occurred on main roads at Carlisle Center.

D. Economic Base:

Remained entirely agricultural community with several small grist and saw mills on available water power.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Vernacular examples of the period divided between central chimney cottages, central chimney two-storey houses and rear-wall chimney, two-storey houses, few of which possessed decorative details beyond the entry. Several ambitious Federalist style houses with end-wall chimney plans and high-style decorative details built in scattered locations (southeastern and southwestern sections). 83 houses existed in Carlisle in 1831.

Institutional: Federalist style meetinghouse built 1811 (First Parish) painted "straw" color with "Chocolate Collour" trim and mahogany color doors. Six school "squadrons" (later districts) established 1780, no schoolhouses seem to have been built prior to 1818 when a brick schoolhouse was built at the town center, brick schoolhouse built in North District, 1828 (Lowell Street), wood-frame schoolhouses may have been built in other districts. Hearse house built 1809 (16'x9'); "noon houses" built by meetinghouse, 1788 (demolished 1837).

Commercial: At least one tavern at center (1782), domestic in scale and plan, probably enlarged to contain public hall; possible one-storey store building at center ca. 1810-20.

Industrial: Artisan workshops and grist and saw mills; no mechanized manufacturing present.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highways remain from early 19th century. No railroads through area, although branch from Acton touches Westford line (1870) with link highway as Westford Street.

B. Population:

Slight increase between 1840 and 1850, thereafter stable until decline after 1865; very small foreign-born population made up primarily of Irish immigrants. No new religious societies formed.

C. Settlement Location:

Small amount of new construction at town center and on Bedford Road near Brook Street; little change in settled area.

D. Economic Base:

Discovery of copper deposit in the hill north of South and Concord streets introduces briefly Carlisle's only manufacturing industry, a copper smelter operated by the leading church bell founders, Henry N.

Hooper & Co. The local townspeople objected, however, to the vegetation-killing fumes, and, unable to purchase the neighboring farms the operation was abandoned in 1849 -- coincidental with the discovery of the Lake Superior ore bodies.

E. Architecture:

Residential: No high-style present; of the small number of new houses constructed, most were side-hall examples of the Greek Revival and Italianate styles, both one and two-stories. Single ambitious examples exist at the town center of Carpenter Gothic and Italianate styles.

Institutional: Late Federalist style meetinghouse built for Union Calvinist (Congregational Society) 1831-32, enlarged 1837, 1866. School districts reduced to five after 1837. Wood-frame schoolhouses built in 1839 (south and east districts), 1840 (North District) and 1869 (East District). Brick schoolhouse, Greek Revival/Italianate style built at Center, 1848. First Parish meetinghouse divided internally into two halls, 1852. Town farm purchased 1852-53; town-owned hearse house built 1867.

Commercial: Limited commerce at town center, one two-storey wood-frame commercial block likely by 1850s, other businesses possibly housed in pre-existing tavern and houses.

Industry: No mechanized industry; small number of grist and saw mills as well as one-storey wood-frame artisan/workshops for blacksmithing, shoemaking and hoop-making.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Roads remain from mid-19th century. No street railway routes through area.

B. Population:

Fluctuation in 478-569 range throughout period; slow growth of foreign-born population to a peak of 110 in 1905, Irish were largest foreign-born group until ca. 1895, after which Norwegians became the largest group. No new religious societies formed.

C. Settlement Location:

No enlargement of settled area.

D. Economic Base:

Barrel-making supported dominant agricultural economy.

E. Architecture:

Residential: No high-style present; nearly no new construction evident; some side-hall plan and center entrance Italianate houses may have been built up to ca. 1880; several extremely simple side-hall examples of the Queen Anne style were built ca. 1900.

Institutional: Victorian Gothic style addition to Union Calvinist (Congregational) Church, 1882, chapel added 1910-12; memorial chapel (astylistic) built prior to 1908 at town-owned cemetery. New South Schoolhouse built 1887; central graded school established by 1899-1900, district school houses closed by 1905, Colonial Revival style central school house built 1908. Queen Anne style, brick library built 1895-1896; new house built at town farm, 1881.

Commercial: Two-storey, gable-face, commercial block (late Italianate style) built at center, 1879 (burned 1925).

Industrial: No development.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Colonial highways rebuilt as autoroutes during mid-20th century including Route 225 (Bedford-Westford Streets) through town center.

B. Population:

Continuous slow growth throughout period.

C. Settlement Location:

Scattered.

D. Economic Base:

No new industries, though dairying, orchardry, truck gardening, and poultry raising thrive.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Several small country estates developed in southeast and southwest sections of town, single high-style examples of Colonial Revival and neo-medieval styles (1920s?). Other new construction limited primarily to modest bungalows and Colonial Revival style cottages/

Institutional: Bungalow style firehouse built, 1925; possible private hospital built in Colonial Revival style (ca. 1920-30) on South Street.

Commercial: Small number of scattered farm stands; two-storey bungalow/astylistic commercial block built at town center, 1928.

Industrial: No development.

XI.

SOURCES

Bull, Sidney Augustus, History of the Town of Carlisle, Massachusetts, 1754-1920 (1920).

Williams, Martha F., 30 manuscript notebooks in Gleason Library, Carlisle, detailing histories with photos and some plans of all (?) old houses (no industries) in Carlisle. Indexed. 1931-1941.

Wilkins, Ruth C., Carlisle, Its History and Heritage (1976)