

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

NATICK

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.

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: January, 1980

COMMUNITY: Natick

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Located on hilly lowland terrain between two drainage systems - mostly to Charles River to south and east, Sudbury-Merrimack to north. Some areas of exposed bedrock but glacial outwash features predominate. Sandy/gravelly soil of good agricultural potential, especially along Charles and east and west of Lake Cochituate. Lake Cochituate drains north into Sudbury River. Several large fresh water lakes and ponds. Large areas of swamps and bog between elevations throughout town.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Fragments of original grant lines still intact in northeast corner. These include: Sudbury Line, 1639 and Watertown Line, 1636. Natick "Plantation" for Christianized Indians established 1651 - 2,000 acres granted by Dedham. Boundaries of Plantation formalized, 1660. Section of Needham annexed, 1744. Established as District of Natick, 1745. Incorporated as Town of Natick, 1781.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Suburban industrial center on the primary western axis of metropolitan Boston. Located at the upper basin of the Charles and Concord Rivers with an extensive complex of ponds, the area is potentially important for native sites, particularly the Indian Praying Town in South Natick of the mid-17th century. Limited water power sites, but important turnpike location in the early 19th century shifted focus to Natick Center. Industrial development coincident with the railroad in the mid-19th century; urban definition of the business district established with construction of brick business blocks. Subsequent growth in the early 20th century continued to focus upon Natick Center with a shift to the western axis around Lake Cochituate with electric trolley and early auto highway routes, portions of which remain in original condition. Continued development has brought overwhelming suburban expansion which threatens remaining historic landscape.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500 - 1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Located on primary western corridor from Massachusetts Bay and upper valley of Charles River. Apparent native trails documented from local histories (Natick, 1948) follow southwest grain along Charles as Eliot and South Streets (Route 16) through South Natick. Secondary western trail around Lake Cochituate from Wellesley as Bacon and Hartford Streets with "ford" at neck of Lake (Route 9) and former loop around western shore (Carling site). Secondary cross-trails from Charles to Cochituate conjectured as Union-Marion Streets from South Natick and possibly Woodland and Farwell Streets on highland around Davis Brook. Trail from Pegan Hill (Dover) to Charles River ford (?) possible as Pleasant Street Transect of main Connecticut Path across north edge as Route 30.

B. Settlement Pattern:

No documented sites reported. Topography suggests that sites should be present, especially on well-drained terraces overlooking Charles (particularly at confluence with major tributaries) and adjacent to Lake Cochituate or other ponds. Vague hints of native occupation in local histories (Bacon, 1856, p. 23).

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Area had sufficient diversity and resources to support native population. Anadromous fish runs in both Charles and Lake Cochituate (from Merrimack). Good agricultural ground. Easily accessible from coast.

D. Observations:

Pattern of native occupation from late Woodland up to establishment of Natick Plantation in 1651, not well understood. Apparently there was native occupation but who inhabitants were and their relationship to known historic tribes is unclear. Note: Historical Society (located in Bacon Library) has small but interesting collection of artifacts from mid-Archaic to Woodland.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620 1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails remained as primary highways along Charles River (Route 16) and to Lake Cochituate (Bacon Street) from Wellesley. Main road from Dedham to Indian. Praying Town at Charles River - South Natick documented for Pleasant and Eliot Streets. Other possible mid-17th century roads include Pond and Mill Streets around Lake Cochituate and Everett Street to Sherborn.

B. Population:

In 1674, 145 inhabitants. A mixed group--many Massachusetts/Neponset people, apparently some Pawtucket (from Concord area) and several Nipmuck.

C. Settlement:

Established 1650 on Charles River, now South Natick. Some evidence area had been cleared, suggested a previous occupation. Town laid out with three long streets; two on north side, one on south side of river. Foot bridge built over Charles, also a fish weir for herring. Houses constructed in native style. A frame building, approximately 25' by 50', surrounded by a circular palisade and ditch served as meetinghouse--same location as present meetinghouse (Worthington, 1890, pp. 2-3). Settlement remained concentrated, little diffused growth. After outbreak of King Philip's War, inhabitants forceably removed to Deer Island, Boston Harbor.

D. Economic Base:

Intent was to create a self-sufficient and viable native community on European standards. Agriculture and grazing by European methods--community registered its own cattle brand, 1670. A sawmill apparently

built, 1658, at outlet to Lake Waban (Wellesley). Handicrafts such as basket and broom making also encouraged. Some traditional activities, trapping, and fur trading, persisted as well.

E. Observations:

The first and largest Indian Praying Town, model for all subsequent efforts. The most concerted and deliberate attempt to acclimate native people to Colonial standards. Moderately successful during this period. Preservation of the South Natick area should be a high priority--area is not overly developed, archaeological potential is very good. Some important excavated material in Historical Society collection.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1676 - 1776)

A. Transportation Routes:

Primary highways remain Eliot and Bacon Streets from mid-17th century. Emergent settlement at Natick Center by early 18th century with radial highways to Sudbury as North Main Street and to Sherborn as Walnut and Farwell-Woodland Streets. Crosslink to Boston Post Road (Route 30) as Oak-Winter Streets through East Natick by mid-18th century.

B. Population:

Native population remained fairly stable despite dislocation to Deer Island during King Philip's War. In 1698, 127 inhabitants. Increasingly numbers of European settlers after 1700 and especially after 1730. By 1749, still 166 native inhabitants. Census of 1764 listed 71 houses and 511 inhabitants in town, only 37 of which were native (however, census only counted permanently settled natives).

C. Settlement:

South Natick or "Old Town" remained focal point of settlement during 17th century. As late as 1685, most dwellings still described as "wigwams." Thomas Sawin, first white settler, after 1685 - built house and gristmill on creek (off South Street-Broadmoor). After 1700 settlement became more diffused - both native and Colonial farms scattered throughout plantation. Increased white settlement in South Natick after 1720. Meetinghouse rebuilt, 1700 and 1721 on location of original. Tavern, Peletiah Morse, built 1848 (Eliot Street). During 1730s secondary locus of Colonial settlement developed east of Lake Cochituate. Extensive debate in 1749 over where meetinghouse was to be rebuilt. After establishment as a district, whites dominated town and its development. (Records on this period are vague and confused.)

D. Economic Base:

Remained an agricultural community--crops, cattle and some orchards--plus some lumbering. A few local mills--grist and sawmill, 1733 (Hezekiah Broad) on Charles in South Natick. Remaining natives peddled baskets and brooms as well as farming.

E. Architecture

Residential: Most houses with pre-1775 construction dates are of the central chimney-two story type with center entrance facades, although several twin (interior) chimney structures may also date from this period. Extremely rare houses near South Natick, both of which have shallow overhangs at the second story and are attributed construction dates in the late 17th and early 18th centuries (MHC - Natick Survey Forms 6 and 7); insofar as these structures resemble an early 18th century 3/4 house with overhangs on Walpole Street, Dover, they may represent the rare survival of a settlement period house-type; however, more research needed to verify.

Institutional, Commercial and Industrial: No known structures exist.

F. Observations:

During period, transition from a somewhat Anglicized but native-run community to a European-owned and operated town. South Natick still retains some 18th century character and should be a priority for preservation.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775 - 1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Main highways from 18th century reoriented with turnpikes in early 19th century along western corridor around Lake Cochituate. Boston and Worcester turnpike (Route 9) laid across Mud Pond and Cochituate Plain through East Natick and North Natick. Local turnpike from Wellesley Center to Framingham through Natick Center constructed as Central Street around Fisk Pond and Train Hill. Crooslink with Saxonville and West Natick built as Speen Street and new highway to Sherborn as Eliot Street (Route 16) across Indian Brook.

B. Population:

Steady, small increases throughout period; no significant foreign-born population prior to c. 1840.

C. Settlement Location:

Buildin-s are not marked on 1831 map; conjecture based on extant buildings and subsequent development: South Natick built up more densely as a village along Eliot and Pleasant Streets; limited development around Natick Center along Central Street and Pond Street; scattered development along North Street.

D. Economic Base:

Entirely agricultural before 1835 (Bacon).

E. Architecture

Residential: Most widespread house type of rectangular floor plan, symmetrical facade, rear-wall chimney-type with simple Federal details and low-pitched (occasionally hipped) roofs, built both as one-story cottages and two-story houses. Very little (if any) high-style Federal evident; most elaborately decorated Fede-al at South Natick.

Institutional:

Well-preserved Federal-style, wood-frame meetinghouse at South Natick (1828, Josiah Bigelow, architect?); five school districts existed during period, none known to remain in unaltered condition.

Commercial: No known structures extant.

Industrial:

No known structures extant with exception of one "ten-footer" shoe shop (MHC - Natick Survey Form 28) built late in period or during 1830s; other "ten-footers" likely to remain, although altered to other uses.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830 - 1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Turnpikes remained as primary highways along Boston-Worcester axis. Early railroad constructed through Natick Center (1835) along axis of Central Street from Wellesley to Framingham with branch of Somerville (1845) across neck of Lake Cochituate.

B. Population:

Large increases in population throughout period, especially between 1850 (2,744) and 1860 (5,515); large foreign-born population after c. 1840, by far the largest group was Irish, followed by much smaller populations of English and German; new religious congregations formed, included Methodist (1834), Universalist (1850s), Baptist (1852-53) and First Congregational Society at Natick Center (by 1852); local tradition states that several ships of Natick men went to California in 1849-50 to the gold fields and that many returned with sufficient capital to establish independent businesses on which much of the town prosperity was based; also much of population increase of 1840s and 1850s is believed to have come from "mechanics" from New Hampshire and Maine who were drawn to Natick by its "facilities for mechanical pursuits" (Bacon, History of Natick, p. 122).

C. Settlement Locations:

Rapid growth of Natick Center as town's main village after opening of railroad (1835), continued growth of villages at South Natick and Felchville, although both declined in relative importance; by 1855 Natick Center contained 275 houses, 76 commercial structures (including 65 workshops). Felchville contained 55 houses, 1 store and 20 (workshops) and South Natick had 65 houses, 1 hotel, 2 stores and 1 meeting-house. In Natick Center, residential development occurred on subdivisions, northeast of North Main Street and North Avenue, and south of Central Street in vicinity of Sherman, Plain, South Main and Cottage Streets.

D. Economic Base:

Dominated by the shoe industry. Asa Felch made first sale shoes, 1827. By 1830 shoes for southern and western markets being transported to Boston returning with raw leather. Henry Wilson shoe shop (HABS, 1936 typical 10-footer of the period). Large shoe factories by 1835 spurred by opening of the Boston and Worcester RR in 1832. New Orleans and Charleston merchants able to visit Natick rather than Boston.

H. Harwood & Sons baseball factory (1858) successful offshoot of leather trade.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Few high-style, architect-designed examples are evident; highest taste of period is formed by ambitious builder-designed(?) side-hall houses and cottages, many of which are nearly identical and appear to have been built on speculation. Greek Revival-style represented by several side-hall, temple front houses (West Central Street and Eliot Street and junction of Bacon and Marion Streets; simple side hall houses (West Central, Pleasant and Union Streets) and by a large number of side hall cottages (Cottage, South Main and surrounding Streets). Subsequent styles represented include Italianate, Second Empire and Victorian Gothic, mostly of side hall plans (1 and 2 story); most elaborate houses exist along Harvard, Grove and West Central Streets. Occasional rows of workers' houses scattered at Natick Center and South Natick.

Institutional: Town hall built (1835), 2 new district schools built (post-1834), high school built (1850s), none believed extant in original form. At least five churches built, only Gothic Revival chapel (1862) at South Natick extant (MHC - South Natick Survey Area).

Commercial: Little, if anything, likely to remain of Italianate-style wooden blocks built at Natick Center, most of which are presumed to have burned in 1874.

Industrial: Some "ten-footer" shops likely to remain in altered conditions. Three-story wooden-frame factory buildings located along railroad bed at Natick Center, most altered, although baseball factory (ca. 1858 - mansard added ?) at North Avenue and North Main Streets remains largely intact, the best example of its period; several apparent former 2 and 3-story factories remain in scattered locations at Felchville and South Natick.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870 - 1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Road and rail system remained from mid-19th century. Local horse railroad service established along North Main Street from Natick Center in 1880s and suburban trolley routes extended from Boston (Wellesley) to Framingham through Natick Center in 1890s along Central and Pond Streets with secondary routes to Saxonville on North Main and South Natick along Union St in early 1900s. Inter-urban electric railway

built along Boston and Worcester Turnpike (Route 9) in 1903 as mainline suburban service. Branch to Natick Center around Pleasant-Walnut Hills on private way, with original roadbed still in place.

B. Population:

Growth remained rapid until ca. 1880; population remained in 8,400 - 9,400 range until ca. 1905-15 during which it began to increase again; large foreign-born population throughout period, made up of Irish, English and Nova Scotian immigrants and, after ca. 1905, Italian and Turkish (Armenian) immigrants.

C. Settlement Locations:

Growth at Natick Center continued on subdivisions established ca. 1850-70, with Walnut Hill (Grove and Harvard Streets) and West Central Street remaining the town's wealthiest neighborhoods; growth at South Natick was relatively small and restricted to a grid of streets southeast of Eliot and Pleasant Streets; growth at Felchville, along North Main Street, tended toward connecting the village with Natick Center; a small number of country estates were developed along the Charles River and one on Leach Lane.

D. Economic Base:

Shoe factories reached peak by 1880s. With 23 establishments, Natick led third in the nation in quantity of boots and shoes produced (Crawford).

Boston's second water supply conduit, Sudbury Aqueduct, built through Natick including two long tunnels beneath Rockland Street and South Natick (1874-76).

E. Architecture:

Residential: Little high-style evident except for exceptional Queen Anne-style house on Leach Lane (Shaw and Hunnewell - 1883 - MHC Natick Survey Form 120), several Colonial Revival and Queen Anne-style houses (Walnut Hill) and one altered Victorian Gothic-style house (Pleasant Street). Relatively few Queen Anne-style houses and cottages exist; the largest number of side-hall houses and cottages built at Natick Center retained mid-Victorian details or are largely unornamented examples of eclectic early 20th century design.

Institutional: Major public buildings of the period include architect-designed examples of Victorian Gothic architecture (Morse Institute), a transitional example of Victorian Gothic/Queen Anne architecture (Bacon Library, South Natick, ca. 1880), a Beaux Arts-style former high school (East Central Street), scattered schoolhouses and one firehouse (early 1870s) at Natick Center. At least two Victorian Gothic-style, brick churches were built at Natick Center during this period. Water Works (Route 9) ca. 1890-1910, Walnut Hill School built ca. 1910; State Armory, ca. 1910.

Commercial: Natick Center is exceptionally rich in brick commercial blocks of Second Empire, Italianate, Victorian Gothic, Queen Anne and Colonial Revival styles built after the fire of 1874; commercial building elsewhere appears to be limited to 2 wood-frame commercial blocks (ca. 1890-1915) at South Natick.

Industrial: Continued use of wood-frame factories; small number of brick factory buildings along railroad bed at Natick Center; also several reinforced concrete factories (ca. 1910-25) along North Main and East Central Streets; no dominant factory type evident.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915 - 1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Abandonment of street railway routes in 1920s through Needham Center and Boston and Worcester in 1930s with building of express auto highway as Route 9. Original cloverleaf interchange remains at North Main St (Route 27) from 1932. Secondary regional auto highways expanded on existing roads as Route 16 (Eliot St), Route 135 (Central Street) and Route 27 (North Main - South Main Sts) in 1930s.

B. Population:

Continued growth; some Boston-oriented suburban population after 1930s.

C. Settlement Locations:

Some new building at the periphery of Natick Center, although gradual shift of residential locations northward toward Route 9 and East Natick; by end of period and after World War II, suburban settlement scattered on tracts throughout central section of town.

D. Economic Base:

Shoe industry passed through decline as changes in women's shoe styles and westward shift in population advanced. 12 factories by 1919; 2 by 1928 (Crawford). Natick's answer to Henry Ford, Northway Motor Truck Co. (1919 - 1923) for a brief period employed 500 mechanics.

Several early 20th century industries - New England Pressed Steel, Natick Mills - built along old Saxonville Branch.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Mostly modest examples of bungalow and Colonial Revival-style houses; few apparent architect-designed houses except along Charles River (2 or 3) and on Walnut Hill.

Institutional: School building throughout town, various styles employed, including Colonial Revival (Eliot School, 1938, Perry, Shaw & Hepburn, architects).

Commercial: Heavy strip commercial development along Route 9 after ca. 1930-35 and continuing to present; some one-story blocks built at Natick Center and limited conversion of former houses to commercial use along Central Street.

Industrial: Construction of astylistic warehouses and factories, along railroad bed, particularly west of Mill Street, around Lake Cochituate and, more recently, along Oak Street.

XI.

SOURCES

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