

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

SHIRLEY

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: April, 1980

COMMUNITY: Shirley

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Located on riverine lowlands and adjacent rolling uplands. Terrain shaped by glacial outwash action and subsequent river reshaping. Variable soil, generally sand to gravel. Uplands drained by numerous brooks and Squannacook River--all flow eastward into Nashua which dominates landscape.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Established as District of Shirley, 1753. Incorporated as Town of Shirley, 1755. Section east of Nashua lost with formation of Town of Ayer, 1871. Western boundary of town in remnant of original Groton Plantation line (1655).

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Rural industrial town on axis of western routes through central highlands. Located along Nashua River valley with local tributaries through uplands. Native sites probable along major streams, especially Squannacook and Catacoonamaug Brooks into Nashua lowlands at regional ford sites. Long-term frontier instability delays permanent settlement until mid-18th century with mill sites along local streams at West Groton and Shirley village. Location of town center on highlands above valley with well-preserved range of Late First Period plan. Development of Catacoonamaug water power during mid-19th century created industrial village along narrow valley with surviving period brick towered mills and array of vernacular housing types. Adjacent location of Shaker community from Harvard in lowlands created complex of substantial farm structures, now maintained by Massachusetts Correctional Institution. Valley site is also used for expansion of Fort Devens army base during mid-20th century with complex of wood housing units. Recent development has been restrained by peripheral location to suburban core and much of area retains authentic period landscapes, although traversed by commercial strips along regional highways.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Located along Nashua River with tributary streams along edge of central highlands. Conjectured trails follow toward west from documented ford at Hazen Road southwest along Catacoonamaug Brook as Peabody-Leominster Roads, northwest along Squannacook River as portions of Kittesridge-Squannacook Roads, and west apparently along The Great Road (Route 2A). Linking trail along the river meadows presumed as Walker Road.

B. Settlement Pattern:

No documented sites. Some probable sites along Squannacook and Nashua Rivers, especially at confluence points, rifts and fords.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Access to seasonal fish runs in Nashua and major tributaries. Limited agriculture in lowlands. Good hunting/gathering potential.

D. Observations:

Though little data available, location of main trail and ford across Nashua suggests some sites should be present.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails remain as primary east/west highways with ford across Nashua River.

B. Population:

No colonial inhabitants.

C. Settlement:

No colonial settlement.

D. Economic Base:

Does not apply.

E. Observations:

Nashua River served as barrier to colonial settlement.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Improvement of river crossing at Pages Bridge (1726) at the Fitchburg Road (Route 2A) and at Paterson Road. Location of Shirley Center during mid-18th century creates radial pattern to north as Parker-Longview-Garrison-Townsend Roads, to south as apparent field divisions as Clark, Center, Benjamin and Hold Roads, with east/west cross links as Hazen, Whitney and Groton Roads. Mill sites along Catacoconamaug (Shirley) forms route junction from Harvard and Lancaster around Hazen and The Major Hills.

B. Population:

A few colonial settlers after 1720. Thirty-three signers of 1747 petition for separate town status. Census of 1765 listed 430 inhabitants in 72 families and 41 houses. Census of 1776 listed 704 people.

C. Settlement:

Scattered farms along west side of Nashua after 1720. Increased settlement as frontier stabilized after 1730. First meeting house built 1754

(Parker and Horse Pond Road), expanded 1762. Second meetinghouse built 1773. Nucleus for small town center. Secondary locus around milling areas on Catacoonamaug Brook after 1750.

D. Economic Base:

Agriculture and grazing. Many orchards. Some lumbering. Several mills: fulling mill (Elisha Rockwood), Squannacook River, 1739; grist and saw mill (Samuel Hazen) Catacoonamaug Brook, from 1749; grist mill (Franis Harris) Mulpus Brook (Woodsville), 1770 (?).

E. Architecture

Residential:

Few examples extant or recorded; evidence suggests that two-story central-chimney vernacular houses were the most widespread house type. Also present were a small number of central-chimney Cape Cod cottages, some with 1/2 or 3/4 facades. While it is possible that some of the Georgian entries and decorative details on houses at Shirley Center date from the end of the Colonial Period, it seems more likely that most post-date 1776.

F. Observations:

An outlying agricultural and milling area of Groton, developed into small rural town after frontier conditions stabilized.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Colonial highways remain from 18th century with focus at Shirley Center. East/west route over highlands as Little Turnpike by early 19th century.

B. Population:

Steady growth throughout period, following a slight loss of population after 1776. No known foreign-born population. Shaker community founded in the southern part of Shirley, 1781; Universalist Society founded 1812; town and First Parish separated, 1822; Orthodox Congregational Society formed 1828.

C. Settlement Location:

Village at Shirley Center, along Main roads; mill village formed at South Shirley primarily along Leominster Road. Small village of Woodsville along Mulpus Brook near Nashua River formed around small-scale saw and grist mills.

D. Economic Base:

Succession of clothiers' mills bridged the 18th and 19th centuries. Earliest cotton mill, 1812, marked beginning of a long series of cotton mill construction of seven mills throughout Federal and Early Industrial

Periods, built along the Catacoonamaug. By 1837 there were three cotton mills, producing \$52,100 worth of product annually. The same power source also provided the location for the first paper mill, c. 1790 (?), by men with training from Waltham. The second paper mill, built in 1828 on the Nashua River introduced a mechanical drying apparatus to the industry. Its inventor, H. P. Howe afterward set up a machine shop near the mill to manufacture the equipment. Small iron works also present, 1790s, in scythe factory (short lived) and nail factory (c. 1810). Principal cottage industry of period was production of palm leaf hats.

E. Architecture

Residential:

Relatively small body of new construction; several high-style late Georgian (1780s) and Federalist houses (mostly with hip roofs, and twin interior chimneys or end-wall chimneys) at Shirley Center and along Center Road. At least one high-style Federalist style house with a decorated entry and moldings was built at South Shirley (Leominster Road). More modest housing consisted of vernacular central-chimney houses (up to c. 1820) and rear-wall chimney houses (c. 1810-30). A small number of central-chimney, one-and-one-half story cottages (Federalist) was built, primarily at South Shirley.

Institutional:

First Parish Meetinghouse remodelled with Federalist style bell tower, 1804; hip-roof one-story Universalist Meetinghouse built at South Shirley, 1816; brick church built for Orthodox Congregational Church, 1829. Shaker Village developed in southeast section of town, 1790s-1840s; mixed construction both brick and wood present, most buildings were of utilitarian Federalist design. Center school house built 1790s, followed by establishment of North and South districts (mid-1790s?). Six school districts in existence after c. 1800-1810, seventh school district established for Shakers c. 1810 (?).

Commercial:

Few commercial buildings, all were probably domestic in scale; at least one combined store/residence at town center (c. 1800-1815); tavern/inn building at North Shirley (c. 1800-1820) and a similar tavern/inn at South Shirley (Ayer Road-c. 1800-1820).

Industrial:

Three cotton mills established 1812-1824, probable wood-frame construction; 3 or 4 paper mills established by 1830, also probable small-scale wood-frame construction.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highways and turnpikes remain from early 19th century. Primary east/west railroad from Boston along Catacoonamaug Brook as Fitchburg route (1845) connecting mill sites at Shirley.

B. Population:

Rapid population growth after 1840 until a high of 1,479 residents was reached in 1855; decline followed 1855. Relatively large foreign-born population (20% of total population in 1855) made up mostly of Irish immigrants); population decline after 1855 was disproportionately taken from foreign-born population which declined to 13% of total population by 1865. Baptist Society organized 1853.

C. Settlement Location:

New settlement focused almost exclusively on South Shirley village and on the Shaker Village at South Shirley.

D. Economic Base:

Cotton and paper remained principal products of factories concentrated on the Catacoconamaug. Four cotton mills built in this period including the Shakers' 1849 Phoenix Mill (extant, MHC #60), the largest of the seven cotton mills built in Shirley. Two paper mills constructed, 1837 and 1868. One on the Squannacook River (opposite the present Groton Leatherboard Co. in West Groton) was said to have been the first in the country to manufacture "leatherboard." (Hurd, Volume I, p. 470). Second nail factory, 1855; pitch fork factory, 1850.

E. Architecture

Residential:

A smaller range of housing was constructed then in the preceding period. High-style was restricted to individual examples of Italianate and Second Empire styles at South Shirley; there is no evidence that any high-style Greek Revival houses were built. The largest number of houses were side-hall plan houses (Greek Revival and Italianate styles). Some company-owned housing seems to have been built, including at least one one-story wood-frame row house built, perhaps as housing for the Shaker-owned Phoenix Mill (1849), although secondary sources report only brick row houses as having been built for the Phoenix Mill; other mills built tenements, although few are presently evident.

Institutional:

First Parish Meetinghouse remodelled 1839; Universalist Church remodelled in Greek Revival style, 1845-46; Orthodox Congregational Church built at South Shirley, 1851 (appearance unknown); Baptist Chapel built 1853 at South Shirley (Greek Revival style). Eighth school district created 1846; all school houses, except three, rebuilt after 1855, all school houses but one were built of brick one-story high; two-story brick grammar school built 1846. Temple-front Greek Revival style town hall built 1847-1848; town poor farm purchased, 1837, sold 1853.

Commercial:

Individual wood-frame commercial blocks (approximately 3-4) at South Shirley, mixed Greek Revival/Italianate styles; at least one block built

with a public hall at the second story (c. 1870?-Village Hall). One railroad depot built at South Shirley by 1856.

Industrial:

Existing mills replaced after fires; most constructions seems to have been wood-frame, two- and three-stories, although one mill (Phoenix Mill-1849) was built of brick, 3 stories high (140' x 50') with simple Greek Revival style trim.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Roads and railroads remain from mid-19th century. Trolley route from Fitchburg to Ayer through Shirley extended across Tophet Swamp on roadbed (intact) through village center on Street and beside Fitchburg railroad to Nashua River crossing.

B. Population:

Population declined until 1890-1895, after which population increased steadily until 1915. Foreign-born population (mostly French Canadian after c. 1895) increased disproportionately to 29% of total population by 1915. Catholic Parish established c. 1895 (?) -not recorded in secondary sources.

C. Settlement Location:

New settlement focused almost exclusively on South Shirley.

D. Economic Base:

Little new industrial development in this period, which for Shirley appears to have been one of stagnation or relative decline. Both the Fredonian and Phoenix Mills were closed in 1883 on the death of their owners, and though the Fredonian opened again under new ownership in 1886, it was the only cotton mill still in operation by 1890. The only paper mill still operating, Binney's, was producing asbestos paper and fire-proof deading felt. In 1888 the Sampson Cordage works took over the Phoenix Mill and has been there ever since. The only new concern to be formed in this period was the C. A. Edgarton Suspender Factory (later President Suspenders, MHC #50), in 1890 the second largest manufacturer of suspenders in the country (Hurd, p. 471).

E. Architecture

Residential:

Little high-style present with the exception of one or two Colonial Revival style houses. Most new houses were modest in scale, consisting of side-hall plan. Queen Anne style houses and cottages and one-and-one-half story bungalows; almost no Victorian Gothic, Second Empire and Colonial Revival style present.

Institutional:

Victorian Gothic style Universalist Church built, 1870; Italianate/Victorian Gothic style Catholic Church built (?) c. 1890-95. Schools gradually centralized; 5 school houses in operation 1890, eclectic style school house built at Shirley Center c. 1910-1920. Romanesque Revival style library built at South Shirley, 1893; Queen Anne style firehouse built at South Shirley, c. 1895 (?). Shaker Village converted to institutional use (?-c. 1910-25?).

Commercial:

Little new development; one three-story brick block (1885) at South Shirley.

Industrial:

Paper mills expanded in late 1880s; new additions largely of utilitarian design wood-frame construction, small amount of brick construction at Phoenix Mills. Large 2-story wood-frame suspender factory, 1881 (MHC #50).

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1948)

A. Transportation Routes:

Trolley line abandoned during 1920s with improvement of east/west auto-roads as Route 2 (now 2A) along The Great Road and the Ayer-Leominster Road through Shirley village. Reconstruction of Ayer Road bridge (1948) across Nashua with "eagle" motif in concrete piers after Fort Devens.

B. Population:

Steady, moderate growth throughout period. Secondary sources do not record information on foreign-born population or on new religious societies. (Episcopal Parish established?-1930s?)

C. Settlement Location:

Same as preceding period.

D. Economic Base:

No new development evident. Suspender company and cordage works remain in operation to present.

E. Architecture

Residential:

New construction made up almost entirely of 1-1/2 story bungalows and Colonial Revival style cottages.

Institutional:

Full centralization of school system by 1930s (?), two-story brick Colonial Revival style school house built 1936 at South Shirley. Institutional (state? school?) use of former Shaker village (?).

Commercial:

Little development, one or two one-story rows of store fronts built at South Shirley, c. 1925-35 (?).

Industrial:

Some expansion of existing plants possible; no apparent new mill complexes.

XI. SOURCES

Chandler, Seth, History of the Town of Shirley, Massachusetts (1883)
Butler, Caleb, History of the Town of Groton, Including Pepperell and Shirley (1848)