

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

NORWELL

Report Date: 1981

Associated Regional Report: Southeast 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.



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MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY

Date: _____

Community: Norwell

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Drumlin and moraine landscape with extensive system of swamps. Sandy to gravelly soils. Drainage south to the North River via Stony Brook, Second and Third Herring Brooks, southwest to Third Herring Brook via Wildcat Creek and Wildcat Brook. Accord and Black Ponds are the only natural ponds, the remainder being the results of the works of man. Many of the streams dammed for mill sites had insufficient flow to provide dependable power.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Incorporated in 1849 as South Scituate from land ceded by Scituate. Name changed to Norwell in 1888.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Norwell's development has had three major foci, the North River, Third Herring Brook and Assinippi. The North River provided not only transportation (with packet landings at Union Bridge), Hobart's Landing (also known as Briggs Landing) and at the Block House (Jame's Shipyard) but a means of livelihood in the form of facilities for shipyards. The Third Herring Brook provided water power for small scale industry. Assinippi is the location of the only early land route connecting the town with Boston. The area at Church Hill near Third Herring Brook in the southwest portion of the town maintained strong economic, religious and social ties with Hanover Four Corners rather than with Scituate (prior to incorporation) or with Norwell Village. Assinippi also developed stronger ties with Hanover than with the parent town. Lack of reliable water power in most of the streams in town resulted in minimal industrial development in the 19th century except in the Church Hill-Hanover Four Corners area. The railroad avoided the town and there was little of the resort development that enabled Scituate to survive in the latter portion of the 19th century. Settlement patterns prior to the 20th century were basically linear with some minor organic development at Norwell Village and at Church Hill. Norwell reverted to an agricultural base during the latter half of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century. The construction of the Southeast Expressway in conjunction with outward movement from Boston resulted in the suburbanization of the town in the 1960's. Suburbanization patterns followed the linear patterns of settlement in general with some subdivision development north of Assinippi Village.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Intermediate access zone between Accord Pond (Hingham) and North River (Scituate) nearly encircled by Herring Brook-North River valley and bordered by Cohasset highlands with limited corridors of travel. Primary north/south trail to Plymouth crosses Assinippi corridor to Accord Pond documented as Washington Street-Route 53 (Dean, 1851, p. 13) with presumed branch to Drinkwater basin as High Street and intermediate route along Herring Brook as Prospect-South Streets. Primary east/west route along North River apparently River Street-Main Street (Route 123) through Norwell Center with presumed ford at Third Herring Brook (Hanover). Other east/west trails around highlands conjectured as Lincoln Street, Mt. Blue-Oaken Streets and Mt. Hope Street with a possible mid-route from Norwell to Hanover as Pleasant-Forest Streets.

B. Settlement Pattern:

No native sites recorded for this period. However, several sites with possible late Woodland component. Sites included an area immediately south of Old Pond Meadows, two locations on Bald Hill and an area north of the Union Bridge. Extensive occupation on the western shore of the North River extending south from the Norwell/Scituate town line to Bald Hill. Possible interior winter site north of Simon Hill on both sides of Bowker Street.

C. Subsistence Pattern:

Rich resource base capable of supporting extensive indigenous population. Alewives found on First, Second and Third Herring Brooks while the North River and Massachusetts Bay were sources of alewives, shad, mackerel, bass and eels. Marshlands and wooded interior rich sources of wild game. High probability of European-Indian trade due to accessible coast.

D. Observations:

High likelihood of contact period occupation when considering environmental diversity and potential for European-Indian trade. Area possibly occupied by pre-settlement European explorers and fishermen due to extensive resource base and accessibility of coast. Aboriginal population culturally affiliated with Manattakesett Indians of Pembroke.

V. FIRST PERIOD

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails improved as regional highways with Plymouth Road to Assinippi as Washington Street and Scituate Road as River-Main Streets. Location of South Scituate meetinghouse during mid-17th century creates radial network from Main Street axis presumed as Cross and Winter Streets. Bridge over Third Herring Brook (1660) and ferries at North River from meetinghouse (Kings Landing).

B. Population:

Possibly small native population in vicinity of Simon's Hill. Majority of native populace situated around the Pembroke Ponds, Pembroke. Only figures available for white population are those of "Old Scituate" (included present Scituate, Norwell, and a portion of Hanover).

C. Settlement Pattern:

Primary locus of the easternmost portion of Route 123 extending from the junction of Route 123 and Winter Street and the Norwell/Scituate line. First church (South Parish Church) built between 1642 and 1645 on hill east of Stony Brook. Constructed as a result of increased settlement southwest of original core of "Old Scituate" (Kent Street).

D. Economic Base:

Limited farming due to rockiness of soil (Dean, 1831, p. 28-29). Focus on harvesting of salt marsh grass for livestock fodder. River and off-shore fishing important economic activities. Development of shipbuilding industry commenced with establishment of Wanton Yard on the North River in 1670. Large number of streams provide excellent power source for mill operation. However, only documentation of mill production was a sawmill built on the Third Herring Brook in 1656. Sustained considerable property losses during King Philip's War - 12 homes and 2 sawmill destroyed in "Old Scituate."

E. Observations:

Settlement the result of expansion of "Old Scituate" away from original node. Proximity to North River, potential grazing land and core of "Old Scituate" encouraged selection of Route 123 locus. Commercial enterprises based on extensive fresh and saltwater sources - fishing, shipbuilding, grazing, mill production. Survived King Philip's War destruction.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Relocation of meetinghouse to Norwell center by mid-18th century created secondary road system with Main Street to Assinippi and north/south radials as Bower, Central, Circuit-Pine Hill Streets. North River ferry maintained at Kings Landing with bridge over Second Herring Brook (1704) at Norwell Center (Dean, 1831, p. 15).

B. Population:

Vestiges of native population on or about Simon's Hill as late as the second half of the 18th century (Deane, 1831, p. 144). Figures for white population only for "Old Scituate" - 1676, 32 families; 132 individuals.

C. Settlement Pattern:

Extensive amount of post-1680 settlement adjacent to the North River shore (shipbuilding families predominate). Major locus of settlement in village of Norwell (Route 123). Site of third and fourth meetinghouses (18th century). Second meetinghouse built further east (1684). Development of secondary locus of settlement in Assinippi in early to late 18th century. Meetinghouse built in 1767.

D. Economic Base:

Marked growth of marine based commerce. Construction of several shipyards on the shore of North River in the last decade of 17th century. Continued expansion of fishing with emphasis on off-shore based operation. Increased development of mill industry led to demise of stream based fishing. Mill construction impeded movement of fish which lead to their eventual elimination from steams.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Late First Period dates are claimed for some half dozen houses in Norwell, the earliest (c. 1680) just postdating King Philip's War with others ranging to 1725; most of these are clustered on Main Street and include center chimney cottages with a few two-story houses. While such early dates are unsubstantiated, it is likely that at least a few houses, such as the Old Parsonage (1728), a center chimney house with the characteristically broad, shallow chimney of the First Period with flues displaced along the ridge, incorporate framing members dating to the late First Period. Several early Colonial

Period residences in Norwell are plank-framed with gambrel roofs; this is a comparatively early use of the gambrell which in its initial form was not framed but shaped over hewn planks cut to the gambrel pattern. In addition to these early houses, a number of mid-century houses survive with concentrations on River and Main Streets. While 1x5-bay, center-chimney houses with gable roofs are most common, a few double pile houses are known. Steeply-pitched hip-roofed center chimney houses (some with the chimney placed forward of the ridge) were a more pretentious alternative, as were center hall, double chimney houses, a very few of which remain extant; one of these double chimney houses is dated as early as 1723. While most period houses are unembellished, a few retain Georgian pedimented door surrounds, shallow pedimented porches, or molded window heads. Although approximately a dozen two-story Colonial houses survive, the most common and most numerous house type in the town is the Cape Cod cottage; the long-lived popularity of this form, from the end of the 17th century through the end of the Federal Period, makes them difficult to date, but at least a dozen and probably more Cape-type cottages, in full five-bay form with three-quarter and half houses forms as well, remain extant along the early roads of the town.

Institutional, Industrial: Meetinghouses were built in 1707 and 1770, while saw and grist mills operated along Third Herring Brook from the 1650s onward.

E. Observations:

Shore of North River continued as major focal point of settlement. However, increased movement of the population to the western interior locating along transportation routes and adjacent to water sources (i.e., mill production). Mill production, shipbuilding and fishing established as the primary economic pursuits. Community exhibited rapid recovery from King Philip's War.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highways remain intact from 18th century with replacement of North River ferry as Bridge Street (1801). Turnpike laid out to Hingham (1801) around Mr. Blue, no trace extant.

B. Population:

Population figures for this period included in Scituate totals. Episcopal Church on Church Hill (est. 1731) moved to Hanover in 1811. Clapp family freed slaves sometime during this period and deeded them land near White Oak Plain in an area known as Wildcat. (D.A.R., 1921). Universalist Society established Assinippi 1812.

C. Settlement:

No new settlements recorded or noted during this period. Growth centered around existing settlements at Norwell and Assinippi. Some new development around Jacobs Pond. Boston to Plymouth road (Route 53) remains a focus. Focus at Church Hill begins to shift to Hanover Four Corners. Black settlement at Wildcat formed prior to Revolution date not known.

D. Economic Base:

Peak of shipbuilding with several sawmills on Second and Third Herring Brooks supplying lumber to four yards within town limits. Both tanning and shoemaking also undertaken, but until political separation of South Scituate, 1849, proportion of products in each town difficult to gauge. By end of Federal Period, three small tanyards in operation (\$8,500 product value) and shoemaking to extent of \$20,000 in combined Scituate/Norwell. Value of ships put at \$52,500, most of which was probably attributable to Norwell yards.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Story-and-a-half Cape cottages remained the most common house type with both center chimney and end chimney examples being constructed; often door surrounds with sidelights to the dado are the only distinguishing Federal feature of these simple but well-built structures, some dozen of which survive across the town. Also built in the period were more modest one-room, one-story cottages, early workers' housing, examples of which can be noted along High Street and elsewhere throughout the town. More substantial housing, including the three-story Delano House (1803), a highstyle Federal structure with a tall monitor roof, was constructed along River Street and also on Main Street in Norwell Village. Although only one brick house (at Assinippi) is known, the more substantial Federal houses of the town incorporate brick end walls. End-wall chimney houses with shallow hip roofs and either single or double pile plans are common, but rear wall chimney examples are comparatively rare; at least a half dozen brick end-wall Federal houses survive along Main, River, Pleasant and Lincoln Streets and Jacobs Lane. Many of these incorporate door surrounds with leaded fanlights. In addition to the end-chimney Federal houses, most of which probably date between 1800-1815, another important group of three or four late Georgian/Federal transitional structures dating c. 1790 remains extant. These are characterized by hip roofs of moderate pitch, ornamental center bays with shallow roof pediments, center chimneys and generally smaller proportions than the fully-mature Federal houses of the town.

Institutional: In 1830, the present meetinghouse, a Federal/Greek Revival structure with a gable roof, three-bay facade, and two-stage square tower with spire, was constructed. Post offices were established at Assinippi and the Village in 1829-30; at least a few district schools are presumed to have been constructed as well although none are known extant.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highways and bridges remain from early 19th century. No railroad constructed through area.

B. Population:

Slight population decline from 1770 in 1850 to 1661 in 1870. Eighty-two foreign born reported in 1855. Methodist Episcopal Church built on Church Hill in 1852, two of the founding members were black women. (D.A.R. p. 200)

C. Settlement

Civic center at Norwell Village served as locus for residential development, the bulk of this development took place by mid-century.

D. Economic Base:

Marked decline of shipbuilding in this period as demands for larger ships outstrips depth of North River. Numerous shipwrights headed to yards in East Boston, Medford, Chelsea, and South Boston in 1840s; both Wanton and Blockhouse yards closed in this decade, though both Fox Hill and Chittenden yards survived until c. 1870. Much of the sawmill product in lumber used in new industry -- box and trunk making (for shoe transport) of which pioneer said to be John Jones, though both John Grose and David Torrey had steam mills for trunk making. Two tack factories begun in 1830s, probably in relation to growing hand manufacture of boots and shoes. Earliest in town c. 1834 initiated by Salmon brothers at Jonahs Mills (NR) and 1837 by Samuel Tolman (both sites in Third Herring Brook). Tack industry evidently a prominent development in several upper Plymouth County towns during '30s and '40s, prompted by Jesse Reed's important tack machine invention in Hanover c. 1815. Simultaneously, Thomas J. Tolman's wooden planes gained national reputation c. 1850-90 in era before introduction of steel planes. Boot and shoe manufacture increased rapidly. By 1865, 70 men and women (presumably all in small shops) produced \$147,232 worth. Many of these shops located in western part of Norwell in Accord vicinity.

E. Architecture:

* Residential: Substantial five-bay, center-hall, end-chimney houses in the Greek Revival style were built at Norwell Village and on River Street, continuing the well-established traditional house form through the 1850s.

In addition, more modest sidehall cottage forms were introduced with a number of examples built along most roads as infill housing. At Church Hill, a tight cluster of Greek Revival sidehall cottages was built in the 1840s and '50s. Only one temple-front Greek Revival house is known, a transitional Federal/Greek Revival house with an attenuated monumental portico on Jacob's Lane. A very few Greek Revival cottages incorporate verandas with Doric Columns; an equally small number of cottages were built with broad, gabled dormers. Only one ambitious Greek Revival/Italianate house is known, on Pleasant Street, but towards the end of the period, Italianate brackets began to be used on many sidehall cottages. Gothic Revival structures are unknown. In addition to residential structures, a great many outbuildings and barns appear to date from the period; these are a particularly well-preserved and important concept of the town's architecture.

Institutional: Several institutional structures were built in the period including the Church Hill Methodist Church (1852), a one-and-a-half story Greek Revival structure with a two-stage square tower and a double entrance Greek Revival schoolhouse (c. 1860) on River Street.

Commercial: Small stores are known to have been built onto existing residential structures but none have survived in their original context. At least one period store (1867) stands on River Street, now converted to a house.

Industrial: The Salmond Tack Factory, established in 1834, still stands on Tiffany Road; a utilitarian, one-story structure, it retains portions of its original machinery including the water-wheel.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Road network remains from 19th century with trolley line along Assinippi corridor on High Street to Accom Pond (Hingham). No streetcar routes to town center.

B. Population:

Increase in population 1870 to 1880 then drop in 1885, population remained stable until 1915. Foreign born population doubled from 1885 to 1915, majority went from Irish to Canadian.

C. Settlement:

New locus of development at turn of century on High Street in Assinippi. Early settlement around Cornet Stetson house almost totally gone. Scattered development along Route 123 and River Street.

D. Economic Base:

Last ship out of Norwell, from Chittenden Yard, 1871. Probably peak of shoe manufacture in this period with expansion of John Litchfield's c. 1870 shoe shop to factory size by George W.H. Litchfield at Bryant's Corner c. 1890.

Factory closed after his death in 1901. In 1867 shoemakers numbered 120 in Norwell (to farmers 121); by 1894 the number of shoemakers in town briefly topped the number of farmers -- 142 vs. 132. By 1907 the number of shoemakers had fallen to 72, though farmers now numbered 139, including 18 poultry growers. Poultry farming had been introduced in Norwell about 1880, and not long after William H. Rudd and Sons had introduced the "Orocco" strain of Barred Plymouth Rocks. Most trunk factories had closed about 1880. Sylvester's tack factory by this time doing extensive business; by 1884 he had introduced steam and had a large New York trade.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Comparatively few houses were built in the period. At Norwell Village, late 19th-century structures consist of a few replacement houses whose Stick Style and late Italianate detailing has been diminished to fit the Colonial/Federal character of the village center. Elsewhere in the town, on Lincoln, Cross, and High Streets and in other scattered locations, simply detailed Queen Anne cottages were constructed; mansard houses and cottages are almost unknown, but a few late Italianate/Stick Style cottages (most of which retain the sidehall plan of the Greek Revival) were built and can be identified primarily by their bracketed door hoods. At the end of the period, after 1900, a few simple bungalows were built with well-detailed, stuccoed Tudor Revival and Craftsman examples on Main, High, and Grove Street. Several bungalows incorporate cobblestone detailing with at least two cobblestone bungalows known, on Main Street and Norwell Avenue.

Institutional, Commercial: Institutional buildings of the period include the James Library (1874), a two-story, hip-roofed Italianate structure on River Street, the Queen Anne style G.A.R. Hall (1900), an Italianate Grange Hall on Main Street, and converted schoolhouse, c. 1875, on Central Street. A few one-story, frame commercial buildings of the late 19th century survive at the Village Center.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Trolley line to Assinippi abandoned and improvement of Plymouth corridor as primary autoroute (Washington Street) from Boston, originally Route 3 (now 53). Likewise east/west connector to Scituate improved as Route 123 (Main Street) through Norwell Center.

B. Population:

Slight drop between 1915 and 1920, gradual increase to 1880 levels by 1940. Slow but steady increase to 1975.

C. Settlement:

Rejuvenation of Norwell Village occurred with reconstruction of municipal buildings in Civic Center. Little residential development

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until after World War II, then extensive development filling in areas between original settlements.

D. Economic Base:

Most sawmills inactive by 1920s. Poultry raising and agriculture dominant. Largest poultry farm in the town of this part of the state said to be that of Joseph Tolman on River Street. x Tolman was considered the originator and chief exponent of the "open front" type of chicken house (Merritt, p. 178). Few new x industries; Accord Chemical, established 1928, an exception.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Limited residential construction occurred with x very few substantial or ambitious houses built; a few replacement and infill structures were built along Main Street and River Street with one well-detailed brick bungalow on Main Street and an unusual Chalet bungalow on River Street. Elsewhere, by the end of the period, Dutch Colonial and Colonial Revival structures (most of these Cape cottages reflecting the dominant Colonial vernacular) in small numbers, harbingers of later suburbanization. Very simple Craftsman and Colonial Revival bungalows were built on back roads as infill and along Grove Street.

Institutional, Commercial: Several major municipal and commercial structures were built at the Village Center in the x 1930s; these are the Norwell Town Hall (R.H. Doane, 1936), South Scituate Savings Bank (1936) and State Police Barracks (Stevens, x Curtin, and Mason, 1933), all brick Georgian Revival structures. Also constructed in the period was the brick Georgian Revival High School (c. 1935, now Junior High School).

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

Industrial: The town has adequately surveyed all industrial structures including the four shipyard sites. Conceivably some "ten-footers" may survive, however, and any continuing survey should take this into account. Particularly impressed by the survival of Salmond Tack Factory and its NR status -- a key industry of its era in this region. Unsurveyed are the Grose shoe factory on High Street (may be no more than a 10-footer), mentioned on MHC form #92, and the Squirrel Funeral Service on Central St. a mid-19th century manufacturer of coffins in the same ownership since its inception in the Federal period.

DEVELOPMENT PRESSURES

Entire area remains under continual expansion from suburban development with housing tracts on secondary roads. Intense pressure obvious along Route 3 corridor between Assinippi and Accord Pond which has almost destroyed remaining historic fabric.

XII. SOURCES

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