

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

ROCKLAND

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.

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MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

Date: August 1981

Community: Rockland

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Rockland is located on the eastern rim of the Narragansett Basin. There is moderate topographic relief in the town. With the exception of Beech Hill virtually all of the southern portion of the town is composed of swamp land, portions of the eastern section of town are also found in swamp. Drainage is via Cushing Brook and French Stream to Hanover. Soils are generally sandy or gravelly where not highly mucky.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Rockland was incorporated on March 9, 1874 from part of Abington. Exchanged territory with Hanover, 1878.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Rockland is an industrial community in Plymouth County. Possible Contact Period native sites. No European settlement during the First Period Colonial period orientation toward Abington Center. Late 18th early 19th century economic base, agricultural with scattered farmsteads forming settlement pattern. Shoe manufacturing in village of East Abington 1830s and nucleated settlement began around them. Mid 19th century economic base was focused on boot and shoe industry and settlement patterns reflected need for worker housing. Residential settlement concentrated around industrial activity through 19th and 20th centuries. Town's economic base continued uni-dimensional until 1940s.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Intermediate corridor between Accord Pond (Hingham) and Pembroke Ponds with connections to Schmatuscacant River (Abington). Primary north/south trail to French Stream documented as Hingham Street (Route 123) from Accord Pond to Rockland center (Campbell, 1975, Abington map) with possible alternate as Pond Street. Probably east/west connectors follow Salem-Forest Streets and Market Street (Route 123) around French Stream with north/south link as Liberty Street along Cushing Brook. Trail locations over Beech Hill around Beech Hill Swamp remain unclear, likely along axis of Spring Street. Reported "interpond trail" across Naval Air Station appears unlikely from surviving evidence (Campbell, 1975, map).

B. Settlement Patterns:

No reported native contact period sites. Two unidentified native sites were discovered in the present center of Rockland. Two additional unidentified native sites were reported east of the present town center adjacent to the Beal Cemetery and the junction of Liberty and Market Streets. Beech Hill is a likely location for native contact period occupation due to its prominence and proximity to extensive marsh land and several freshwater streams.

C. Subsistence Base:

Seasonal fishing, hunting, collecting, and horticulture. Fishing on Rockland's several streams and Accord Pond. The extensive marsh land of eastern and southern Rockland were excellent habitats for wild game sought by the native population. Potential planting grounds were south and west of the present town center. The natives probably travelled to the coast (e.g., Weymouth, Scituate, Marshfield) during the late spring and summer seeking the varied marine resources and trade with European fishermen.

D. Observations:

Rockland's resource base was capable of sustaining a small - moderate native population. The area's natives were probably locally affiliated with the larger native communities situated in Weymouth and in the vicinity of Pembroke Ponds. Regionally, the natives were probably tied to the Massachusetts centered in Neponset.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails improved as regional highways with main path from Hingham to Bridgewater as Hingham-Market Streets (Route 123) over French Stream. No documented native paths. The Satucket path (major native route) passed through the present centers of Abington and Whitman (north-south). A possible extant native path extends south from Woodbury Road to Market Street.

B. Population:

No reported native population figures. White settlement post-dated 1675.

C. Settlement Patterns:

The native patterns were probably similar to those of the contact period. The area lacked a white population.

D. Economic Base:

Native economy probably focused on traditional seasonal subsistence rounds. Anglo-Indian trade, however, likely became an important facet of the native economy with establishment of white settlements throughout southeastern Massachusetts. White settlers from nearby communities (e.g., Weymouth, Hingham, Scituate, the Bridgewaters) probably used the area for grazing land, lumbering, and hunting.

E. Observations:

Future research should focus on native development during this period. Secondary sources virtually ignore the history of the native community.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Development of Abington town center during early 18th century created expanded road network to French Stream mill sites including Summer Street and Spring Street to Beech Hill.

B. Population:

No population figures for native or white inhabitants. Old Abington (Abington, Rockland, Whitman) around the time of incorporation (1712) had 300 residents. By 1726, the figure had increased only to 371. There was nearly a 400% increase between 1726 and 1764 with the population reaching 1263 inhabitants. At the time of the Revolution (1776), Old Abington had 1236 residents. The majority of the Old Abington settlers were Duxbury, Hingham, Scituate, Newbury, and Weymouth natives.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Native occupation of the land east of the present center of Rockland continued into this period. Some of King Philip's forces established an encampment immediately south of Marks Street (Rockland Booklet Committee 1974:7). Two "Indian House" probably dating to the 18th century situated a short distance southeast of the previously mentioned native encampment and immediately east of the Liberty and Webster Street junction, respectively (1896 Map of Old Abington).

White settlement of present Rockland occurred well after termination of King Philip's War (last settled area of Old Abington). Actually, the earliest settlers were probably several black slaves who settled near and tended Thaxter's mill (located adjacent to the junction of Cushing Brook and Bradford Street) in c. 1703 (Hobart 1866:247). The first documented white settlement did not occur until the 1730s 1740s in the vicinity of Liberty, Market, and Salem Streets. Several homes were established near the northernmost portion of Union Street. Late 18th century infill took place along Liberty and Market Streets.

D. Economic Base:

The remaining native population probably was forced increasingly to adopt a sedentary lifestyle due to the expanding white settlement. White community was engaged primarily in agriculture. The lumber industry provided timber for the North River shipbuilding operations. The only documented industrial facility was Thaxter's saw mill. The sites of three 19th century mills on the northern portion of French's Stream, Studleys Pond and south of the Pond, respectively, may have been utilized in the 18th century.

E. Architecture:

Residential: The only house in Rockland known to date from the Colonial period is the Green-Willett House, a central-chimney, story and a half cottage with a one-story porch; the house was standing in 1745. No two-story houses of the period are known. Although Rockland was only sparsely-settled before the Federal period, at least a dozen of the town's many central-chimney cottages date from the period 1750-1775. Colonial period cottages are particularly common at the northern end of Union Street where a number of simply-detailed central-chimney cottages stand. Most of the Colonial period cottages known have the standard center-entered plan, five bays wide by two bays deep; most cottages exhibit the typical Cape Cod-cottage end wall fenestration consisting of three standard double-hung sash with smaller square fixed sash in the gable peak and at the eaves. At least one cottage (Beal House, 1753) once standing on Salem Street, is depicted in a 19th century engraving; it is a three-quarter plan, central chimney cottage shown with double-hung casement sash and a curious sheathing of very wide planks. Both the casement sash and a sheathing are extremely belated features for 1753.

F. Observations:

The Rockland area retained a small native population. The white settlement was the least developed portion of Old Abington lacking civic/religious and substantial commercial and industrial facilities. The community throughout this period remained closely tied to present Abington (commercial, civic/religious center of Old Abington). The establishment of community autonomy did not occur until the 19th century with its early 19th century organization as a parish and late 19th century incorporation as the town of Rockland. The Dyer Memorial Library (Abington) is an excellent source of secondary and primary material and historic artifacts associated with Old Abington's early development.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Improvement of north/south connections from Weymouth to Rockland center with axis of Union Avenue as primary link and North and Webster Avenues as east/west cross connectors.

B. Population:

Separate population figures not available prior to incorporation in 1874. Congregation Church at East Abington (Rockland Center) 1813.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Continuation of residential farming settlement along existing roads, most evident along Market Street at Studley's Pond and along Union and Webster Streets.

D. Economic Base:

At least four grist and/or sawmills in operation in 1790s. The sawmills like others in Abington and Whitman up to about 1830, supplied large quantities of oak timber to North River shipyards and other ports from Boston to Plymouth -- though the storms of 1804 and 1815 virtually brought much of these harvests to an end. Timber also supplied an active wooden box industry.

Rockland shoe manufacture also begun in this period by Thomas Hunt, 1793, whose father had moved from Weymouth to Rockland twenty years before. Rockland shoemakers were thought to have been the first in New England to trade with the South and Cuba (Rockwood), and it was Hunt himself who instructed Abington tanner David Gloyd in the mysteries of shoemaking in the early 1820s. By 1832 there were six "manufactories" of boots and shoes in Old Abington, producing \$243,750 worth of footwear annually (more than twice the comparable figure for Brockton).

E. Architecture:

Residential: Settlement increased substantially in the period and the town achieved sufficient autonomy for a separate parish to be established in 1813. Although cottages remained the most common house form, the presence of some half-dozen two-story houses indicates a rise in prosperity over the Colonial period. At least two two-story houses, both center-chimney examples, are dated to the late 1780s; one house incorporates an enclosed porch while the other has a porticoed entrance. Of the half-dozen two-story Federal houses known, most probably were built somewhat later in the period, with interior end-chimney, hip-roofed houses being most common. At least one double house of the Federal period is known; this has an unusual plan with four bays across the facade and one-story sidehall entrance porches appending the end walls. By far the most common house form is the central-chimney story and a half cottage with five-bay, center-entered facade; some three dozen such cottages of the Federal period are known in the town, with the largest concentration located on Union Street. Less common are interior end-wall chimney cottages but some half dozen survive. At least one three-quarter plan cottage is known along with a single end-chimney, half-plan cottage.

Institutional: The first meetinghouse was built in 1812; according to later depictions of it, it was a two-and-a-half story, gable-roofed structure with a shallowly-projecting square tower surmounted by an open square belfry and spire. This is the only institutional building known to have been constructed in the period, although as the town was still part of Abington, at least a few of the 11 district schools existing in Abington in 1822 undoubtedly stood in Rockland; three schools are shown on the 1830 map of Abington. None of the above-mentioned buildings are known to survive.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Continued expansion of street grid to focus of Rockland center with Concord, Plain and Water Streets. Other period connectors include Pleasant, Forest Streets in North Rockland and Weymouth Street to South Weymouth. Improved connection over Beech Hill as Beech Street.

B. Population:

Separate population figures not available prior to incorporation in 1874.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Continued residential infill along Union and Webster Streets also some residential development along Liberty Street between Water and Market. Beginnings of industrial development along Union and Webster. Small industrial node at Water Street and railroad but generally development remains scattered.

D. Economic Base:

In 1837 Old Abington, the third largest town in the county, was manufacturing as many shoes as all other towns in the county put together. In the 1850s and '60s East Abington became the site for several model shoe factories, including those of John Spence (1854), the first local manufacturer to specialize in heels; Jenkins Lane (1859), Leonard Blanchard (\$250,000 annual product in 1865); and Washington Reed (1864), one of the leading manufacturers of fur-lined overshoes in the country. Much of the business in the 1860s was spurred by Civil War demands and by the McKay stitching machine (invented by Lyman Blake of Whitman), to which the success of the men's boot and shoe industry in the area generally has been attributed. Old Abington is said "to have shod half the Union army" (Thompson, p. 480 -- though we note that the other "half of the Union Army was shod by North Bridgewater" [WPA Guide]) with machine-sewn shoes, and its success in wartime is thought to have guaranteed the popularity of the machine.

J. Torrey's Soap Mf'g on Market Street was the only other non-footwear manufacturer identified in the period.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Cottages remained the most common house form of the period with conservative center-chimney cottages built in equal numbers with the more up-to-date end-chimney cottages. Although sidehall-plan cottages were also built in some numbers. Most are transitional Greek Revival/Italianate examples and probably date from the later years of the period. Very few sidehall-plan Greek Revival cottages were built; rather, the interior end-chimney plan cottage of the Federal period was re-oriented with the gable end facing the street to suggest the temple-front of the Greek Revival. While recessed sidehall porticoes are incorporated in these cottages, they commonly lead to center-entrances on the long wall. Such cottages were built in large numbers from the early

of the period probably into the 1860s. The sidehall plan predominated from the mid-century through the end of the period, with story-and-a-half cottages as well as story-and-a-half plus attic cottages in the Italianate style being most common. The existence of a single Greek Revival cottage with interior end-chimneys and a five-bay, center-entered facade with recessed portico was noted on Union Street; while common in Middlesex County, Greek Revival cottages with recessed porticoes across the facade are rare in Plymouth County. Sidehall houses, in both the Greek Revival and Italianate styles, were built in small quantities during the period. By the end of the 1850s and through the 1860s, some more ambitiously-detailed houses were constructed in the town, with examples on Market, Webster, and Union Streets. These include the Bigelow House (1859, Luther Briggs, Boston, architect), and a two-and-a-half story L-plan Gothic Revival house with a square tower, trefoil gable windows, and lancet windows in the main body of the house, and a hip-roofed Italianate house (1865-74) on Market Street with a square plan and round-head dormers projecting into the roofline.

Institutional: Churches built in the period included the First Baptist Church (1856), a story-and-a-half Romanesque Revival building on a raised basement with a simple two-stage steeple, and the second church of the Rockland Congregational church, a two-and-a-half story nave plan Gothic Revival building with a massive offset buttressed square tower; neither is still standing. Also built was a large two-and-a-half story Italianate school (1866) with a projecting two-story entrance porch and octagonal lantern as well as a smaller two-story Italianate school with entrances in each of the two facade bays (no longer extant); probably a dozen other schools once stood in the town as at least 33 schools are recorded for the town of Abington in the Early Industrial period.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Extension of branch railroad from Abington to Hanover through Rockland center (1870) along east/west axis. Expansion of interurban trolley service from Brockton-Abington to Weymouth-Hingham through Rockland center during 1890s with routes on West Water-Union Streets and Webster Avenue to Norwell.

B. Population:

Population in 1875 totaled 4203, continuous growth to end of period with 1915 total of 7074. Foreign born population 728 in 1885, by 1915, it totaled 1115. Dominant ethnic group throughout period was Irish however by the end of the period there were concentrations of Canadians, Italians, and British. Spiritualist activity in town 1869-1883.

C. Settlement:

Considerable residential development by turn of century bounded by Studley's Point on the west, Market on the southwest, Crescent on the southeast, Howard and Liberty Streets on the east and extending one block in from the intersection of Union and Webster on the northeast.

D. Economic Base:

The peak of Old Abington's shoe production was reached in 1865 when over 2800 men and women (roughly in proportion of 7 to 1) were producing \$3,460,387 worth of boots and shoes (as compared to \$1.46 million for Brockton). If the figures from a decade later are any guide, probably about 46% of this figure can be attributed to Rockland boot and shoemakers -- or \$1,591,778 in 1865. In 1875, 9 manufacturers of boots, shoes, and moccasin (fur-lined overshoes) in Rockland made \$1,130,728. Unlike Whitman and Abington, however, Rockland's shoe industry did not cease to develop after the 1880s. Instead, most of Rockland's Late Industrial period development occurred in the 1890s and 1900s when several important wood-frame shoe factories were built, attracting local as well as Brockton, North Easton, and Boston firms. The Emerson Shoe Company, burned out of Brockton in the disastrous Grover shoe factory fire, moved to Rockland in 1906 and became the town's largest employer. Rice and Hutchins came from North Easton in 1894; Hurley Shoe moved to the town in 1900. As the firms moved in, the character of the industry also changed, replacing small native companies by factories owned by firms headquartered in other cities. By 1910, Rockland shoe manufacturers were producing over \$7 million worth of footwear, slightly more than a third the value of Brockton, a city eight times the size of Rockland.

E. Architecture:

Residential: A full range of residential architecture is present for the period c. 1880 through 1910. Most of the sidestreets at the town center were filled in with modest story-and-a-half plus attic sidehall houses; more ambitious houses were built in elite neighborhoods. In addition, very simple workers' cottages as well as at least a few multiple-family dwellings, including triple-deckers, were built. While Queen Anne style houses predominate, a number of houses and cottages incorporate some Stick Style detail such as an incised or pierced gable screen or picket frieze at the roof; mansard roofs were also used with more frequency than has been noted elsewhere in the county. Most mansard-roofed dwellings are sidehall cottages although mansard-roofed houses are known. Residential construction appears to have peaked before the turn of the century as the later styles are less well-represented; Colonial Revival houses, many of these with the pyramidal roof and four-square plan most common elsewhere in the region, are not as numerous as Queen Anne houses, while Shingle Style houses and cottages are very rare. Most triple-deckers have very simple Queen Anne details; a few Brockton-type Queen Anne two-family houses are known. Most of Rockland's more pretentious houses are located directly on Union Street, the town's main commercial thoroughfare, between West Water and Market Streets, and include several large late Italianate/Stick style houses, an imposing Queen Anne house with carved bargeboards in the Craftsman manner and a formal Colonial Revival house with monumental portico. One other very well detailed Queen Anne house is known, on Reed Street.

Institutional: Several churches were built in the period including First Congregational (built to replace the 1857 church which burned in 1890), a L-plan Queen Anne building with an offset square tower, the Church of the Holy Family (1882), a brick, nave, plan Gothic Revival church with offset square tower and spire and the Channing Unitarian (1889, Thomas M. Clark, Boston), architecturally the most significant of the three, a story-and-a-half nave plan church in the Craftsman style with rubble basement, mullioned windows and red-slate hung walls. Also built in the period was the G.A.R. Hall (1899), the Rockland Public Library (1903, McLean and Wright, Boston), a gift of the Carnegie foundation and the town's most imposing Beaux-Arts classical building, and the Rockland High School (1908, Cooper and Bailey, Boston), a two-and-a-half story brick Georgian Revival building with a projecting pedimented porch with Ionic columns in antis.

Commercial: Most of the town's commercial buildings date from the Late Industrial period, with several notable examples at the town center on Union Street. These include the Colonial Revival Blanchard Block, (1915), a truncated High Victorian Gothic Brick building (it has lost upper stories), and several more modest late Italianate two-story frame commercial buildings with bracketed cornices (c. 1890).

Industrial: Most of Rockland's industrial buildings date from the period with several very well-preserved complexes of utilitarian design including the Hurley Shoe Factory (1903), the Emerson Shoe Factory (1891), and the Wright Shoe Factory, all of frame construction and from two to four stories in height with low gable roofs. The Rice and Hutchins Shoe Factory (1894) incorporates a sawtooth monitor roof, unusual for the area's shoe factories.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Abandonment of street railway lines to Rockland center during 1920s and improvement of local roads as auto highways. Primary east/west regional connector as Route 123 (Webster Avenue-Liberty-Market-Center Avenue around Rockland center. Location of Weymouth Naval Air Station (c. 1941) in North Rockland cuts Union Street connection to Weymouth.

B. Population:

Continued population growth with some fluctuation between 1920 and 1930.

C. Settlement:

Residential infill around Rockland Center continues until settlement pattern reflects present town configuration.

D. Economic Base:

Like Brockton, Rockland's industrial character was tied strongly to the shoe industry, with little diversification.

Most of the large shoe factories closed in the depression years of the 1930s -- Emerson, 1931; Rice & Hutchins, 1934; Hurley, 1938.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Most of the houses built in the Early Modern period are either modest Craftsman and Colonial Revival cottages or multiple-family dwellings. Hip-roofed cottages with raised basements and enclosed kneewall porches are most common although a few well-developed Colonial Revival bungalows are known. In multiple-family construction, Colonial Revival two-family houses outnumber triple-deckers. Also known is a single two-story frame Craftsman apartment block (c. 1920) on Howard Street.

Institutional: Both of Rockland's architecturally significant institutional buildings of the period are by the firm J. Williams Beal and Son; these are the Post Office (1932), a two-and-a-half story brick Georgian Revival building with flanking one-story wings, and the Junior High School (1928), and a three-and-a-half story Romanesque Revival Building.

Commercial: Several brick and concrete commercial buildings were constructed at the town center during the period including the Rockland Trust (1917, T.E. James, Boston), a one-and-a-half story Georgian Revival building with round-arched windows, the Bigelow Block (1924), a concrete Beaux-Arts classical building and the Bemis Building (1929).

XI.

SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

Rockland's survey is well-researched and identifies a wide range of resources within the town; the town center is particularly well-documented but some individual houses of architectural significance have been missed in outlying areas (Queen Anne house on Reed Street, for example). Potential districts at Upper Union Street (near Naval Air Station; 18th through early 19th century residential) and at town center.

Industrial:

Rockland's recent survey includes most of her industrial structures, supported by substantial historical material.

Developmental Pressures:

Intense commercial expansion along Route 123 axis (Market Street) threatens historic suburban fabric of Rockland center and French Stream mill sites. Rockland business district remains active, while suburban development continues through area, especially around Beech Hill and Hinham Street axis to Accord Pond.

XII. SOURCES

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