

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

ROCHESTER

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: June, 1981

Community: Rochester

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Rochester is located in the coastal lowlands inland from Buzzard's Bay. The soils are sandy to gravelly. Topographic relief is moderate with the exception of the Vaughn Hill esker in the west central portion of the town. Drainage is to the south via the Mattapoissett River in the west and the Sippican River in the east. There are numerous ponds in the town some artificial and some natural the Snipatuit being the largest natural pond. The other noteworthy natural pond being the kettlehole Mary's Pond on the eastern boundary. There is an extensive system of swamps in the town.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

The town of Rochester was established on June 4, 1686 (O.S.). Part was included in Wareham, 1739. Part annexed to Fairhaven in 1836. Part established as Maron in 1852 and part as Mattapoissett in 1857.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Rochester is an inland rural community on the western boundary of Plymouth County. There appears to have been a large native population during both the Contact and First Period. First Period European settlement relatively restricted to herding and livestock raising for Plymouth proprietors. The European population increased extensively during the Colonial Period, colonial economic base primarily agriculture with two iron forges and tar production for the Mattapoissett and Marion shipyards providing variety. Late 18th and early 19th century economic focus continued to shift away from Rochester center to Marion and Mattapoissett. Minimal residential development along the major roads during this period. Early to mid-19th century economic base reverts totally to agriculture which remains prominent throughout the remainder of the study period. Slow population growth and lack of economic incentives resulted in minimal residential development in the 20th century. Some post World War II suburban development.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Inland corridor between Assawampsett Pond (Middleborough) and coastal harbors at Mattapoissetts and Sippican (Marion). Primary trail from Assawampsett Pond to Sippican apparently follows from Quittecus Pond (North Rochester) along Snipatuit Pond Road to Vaughn Hill past Snipatuit Pond and southeast as Rounseville Road (Rt. 105) to Rochester Center to Dexter Road (now abandoned). Primary inland coastal trail is documented as Perry-Hill Roads

from Rochester Center to Mary's (Merrys) Pond-Masquunipash as Mary's Pond Road with ford at Doggett Brook (Leonard, 1907, pp. 98-99) and former loop over Sippican River as Bates Road. Original trail preserved intact as former branch at Cross Road with connections to main north/south trail to Sippican Harbor as Country Road (Wareham). Other possible trail routes include north/south connector to Mattapoisett is Mattapoisett Road around Towzers Swamp with conjectured link to Snipatuit Pond along axis of Vaughn Road and a probable north/south trail around Cedar Swamp from the Sippican ford along the axis of Walnut Plain Road. Remnant trails apparently intact around Haskell Swamp to Mattapoisett along Towzers Neck.

B. Settlement Patterns:

No reported native contact period sites, one small native site with a Woodland component situated south of Snipatuit Brook and North Avenue junction and five unidentified native sites clustered around junction of Perry Hill, Mary's Pond, Marion Roads. However, there is a strong likelihood. Rochester was the site of native population as suggested by the area's environmental diversity, coastal accessibility and proximity to the Middleboro Ponds, the site of extensive native contact period settlement. Native population probably focused around the two major freshwater ponds (Little and Great Quittacus and Snipatuit Ponds) and the moderate uplands of central Rochester (e.g., Vaughn Hill, town center).

C. Subsistence Patterns:

Seasonal hunting, fishing, collecting and horticulture. Extensive swamp, woodlands and freshwater ponds and streams served as an excellent habitat for wild game, water fowl and fish (seasonal fish runs in Snipatuit Pond and Mattapoisett River). c. 1700 English fish weir on Snipatuit Pond (probably located at pond's outlet to Mattapoisett River) may predate white settlement. Proximity to coast facilitated access to marine resources (i.e., shellfish, fish, water fowl) and contact with European fishermen and explorers. The area's lowlands and gentle uplands likely utilized as planting grounds.

D. Observations:

Varied resource base capable of supporting considerable native population. Local affiliation with major native settlement of Nemasket (Middleboro Ponds) and regionally associated with Pokanokets (Wampanoags) centered in Mt. Hope, Rhode Island. Rochester area probably served as fall, winter and early spring settlement site due to its seclusion from seasonal coastal storms. Native population sought the more exposed coast (Mattapoisett, Marion, Wareham)

and its marine resources during the warmer late spring and summer months. There is an excellent likelihood of surviving contact period native sites as a result of the continued rural nature of Rochester.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

Native trails improved as regional highways with main inland coastal road along Hill-Perry-Marys Pond-Country Roads with ford at Doggett Brook and Sippican River and main connector from Sippican Harbor to Assawampsett Pond (Middleborough) as Snipatuit Pond Road from Rochester Center (Rt. 105).

B. Population:

No specific native population figures. However, Rochester land transactions between local sachems and white settlers in 1660's and 1670's suggests there was an appreciable population. White settlers limited to a handful of Scituate and Plymouth families some of who may have settled in Rochester as early as 1649.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Area's two major ponds and central Rochester probably continue as primary native settlement sites. Towser's Neck inhabited by Totosin (Totosin) prior to and during King Philip's War. Minimal pre-1675 white settlement consisting primarily of individuals hired by Plymouth to herd and shelter livestock. Settlement probably focused on the riverine meadowlands and gentle uplands of central and southern Rochester (good grazing land).

D. Economic Base:

Native populace generally able to maintain seasonal subsistence pattern due to limited white settlement. However, expanding Anglo-Indian trade resulted in some disruption of traditional native economy (increased dependence on trade goods). Husbandry and subsistence crop production, hunting and fishing primary economic pursuits of white settlers. Little opportunity for commercial harvesting of local resources.

E. Observations:

Rochester area lacked a discreet white settlement and service facilities (meetinghouse, mills etc.). Area utilized basically as grazing land for Plymouth and Scituate livestock maintained by a number of hired overseers.

VI.

COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Location of Rochester meeting house created network of local highways around town center during early 18th century. Period highways include system around Sherman Brook as Clapp, Mendale, Sherman, Alley, Burgess and Neck Raods with secondary system along Mattapoissett River as Cushman, Riundsville and Hartley Roads. Connecting east/west period highways include High Street across Sippican River and North Avenue between Snipatuit and Quitecus Ponds. Major improvement of period is Long Bridge (Marion St.-Rt. 105) from Rochester Center across Doggett Brook.

B. Population:

Discreet native population maintained throughout late 17C. and 18C. Earliest figures for "Old Rochester" (Rochester, Mattapoissett, Marion, Wareham) list 60 white families residing in the community in 1683. Majority from Marshfield, Plymouth, Salem, Sandwich and Scituate. By 1765, population numbered 1939. It increased 21% to 2449 residents by 1776. There was an influx of a small number of Acadian families during the late 1750's. Small black population first documented during early 1730's.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Expanding white settlement and King Philip's War displaced native population. 1676 English statute stipulated natives recognizing Plymouth authority were to settle west of the Sippican River up to the Dartmouth line. Population overseen by native leaders approved by English. Native settlement in Towsers Neck continued until early 19C. White settlement increased dramatically with termination of King Philip's War. Additional settlement incentive provided by proprietors offer of rights to tar production to each new Rochester landholder. Unclear impact King Philip's War had on community. Primary settlement node established in 1680's at junction of Perry Hill, Rousenville and Marion Roads. Meetinghouse erected c. 1699 adjacent to early 19C town hall. Contemporary settlement clustered around southern end of Leonard's Pond attracted by milling potential. Mill village developed around Harley Mill-pond along Cushman/Snipatuit, Hartley and Rousenville Roads in early-mid 18C. Additional early - mid 18C. Settlement on Vaughn's Hill, North Rochester and vicinity of Mill Pond. Early 18C settlement expansion in present Mattapoissett and Wareha, resulted in establishment of 2nd Precinct of Rochester (Mattapoissett) in 1733 and Wareham in 1739.

D. Economic Base:

Increased limitations placed on native subsistence rounds with expanding white settlement. Prime planting grounds utilized by settlers while access to marine resources on Marion and Mattapoissett coast limited by English coastal development. Local statute (late 1670's) prohibited natives living in areas less than three years from fishing or hunting in town bounds. Increased sedentary life style, some turn to English for employment (i.e., laborer, servant). Agriculture continued as primary white occupation throughout late 17C. and 18C. Late 17C/early 18C. development of mill and iron industries. First mill (Grist?) began operation in 1680's at junction of Sippican River and Marys Pond Road. This area was the site of several later operations including C.1704 gristmill and 18C. forge. Several mills were erected south of the town center on the Dexter Mill Brook in the 18C., the earliest (James Winslow) probably dating to early 18C. Winslow family established an iron forge and mill at the southern end of Forge Pond in the mid 18C. The southern outlet of Harley Millpond was probably the site of William Whittredge's early 18C. gristmill. A cluster of mills (2 grist 1 saw) and a single sawmill possibly predating 1775 were situated on the West (Mill Pond) and East Branch of the Sippican River, respectively. Bog iron removed from Forge and Snipatuit Ponds during the 18C. was utilized by the town's two iron forges. Tar production was an important economic pursuit until the Revolution.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Comparatively few 18th century houses survive in Rochester. Rochester's earliest houses are dated to the 1690's with the only surviving house being an end-chimney two-story house (C. 1690) on Dexter Lane, enlarged in the mid-18th century to a central-chimney plan with a Georgian pedimented door surround. For two-story houses, the smaller end-chimney form was probably more common than the two-celled, central-chimney form. Two-story houses were undoubtedly outnumbered throughout the 18th century by the more modest central-chimney gable or gambrel-roofed cottage, of which several examples dated to the early 18th century are known on Rounseville Road and at North Rochester on North Avenue. Other central-chimney, gable-roofed double-celled cottages probably dating to the 18th century stand on Snipatuit, Mattapoissett and Marion Neck Roads and on North Avenue. Houses of less than the five-bay, double-celled plan are less common but at least one three-quarter plan two-story house with an integral lean-to is known on Perry Hill Road with a similar three-quarter plan, gambrel-roofed cottage on Mattapoissett Road.

Institutional: Rochester's first meetinghouse was built C. 1699 at Rochester Center. A very small structure (24'x26'x10'), the meeting house had gabled ends and three galleries; it was replaced in 1717 with a larger structure (40'x35'x20') to which, in 1733, a second set of galleries were added on the third floor.. In 1748, a parish was formed at North Rochester and a meetinghouse built. The meetinghouse at Rochester Center was replaced in 1760.

E. Observations:

Development of an agricultural community with moderate industrial base. Establishment of civic and industrial facilitated development of community autonomy from Plymouth. However, long-term economic development hampered by loss of Wareham and establishment of 2nd Parish of Rochester in early 18C., areas with extensive coasts and marine resources. High likelihood of surviving late 17C and 18C. domestic and industrial sites due to lack of post-18C. development.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Road system remains unchanged from 18th century with focus of highways at Rochester Center.

B. Population:

Increase from 1776 to 1790, slight drop in 1800 then steady gain to end of period.

C. Settlement:

Civic center at Rochester Center, industrial node at Leonard's Pond and Rounseville. Shipyard and salt-making settlements at Mattapoissett Village and Sippican (Marion). Fourth precinct created at Sippican 1798. Dispersed farming along all major roads.

D. Economic Base:

Relatively little development in Rochester during this period. "Our navigation," wrote one authority, "is so much an object of our attention as to be a great disadvantage to our husbandry." The Mattapoissett, Sippican, and Weweantic rivers provided some water power for the numerous sawmills supplying quantities of white oak to the nearby shipbuilding communities. Besides a number of grist mills, there are 13 sawmills in this town (Old Rochester) with 2 forges, one of which has a triphammer, and one a furnace. It must be understood that many of these mills are

intermittent. Several are suspended in the summer to prevent the flowing of meadows, while others may not, at that period of the year, have a supply of water. ("Topography," 1815).

A decade later:

Here is one forge for making iron, but the scarcity of water in a great measure cramps its usefulness in the summer season... In the north part of town is a furnace, called Stillwater Furnace on account of the sluggishness of the stream. (Furnace operated by Zenas Wood.) It stands on Black River which rises in Middleborough, and only the south-easterly end of its is in Rochester. Its operation is confined to the winter season, and then it is very productive. (Holmes, 1823).

Various attempts had been made to improve the herring capacity of the town. Three weirs on the Mattapoissett River (two within limits of present Rochester) allowed herring into Snipatuit Pond. Early in the 19th century a canal was cut out of Merry's Pond to Sippican River to induce alewives into the pond, without success.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Two-story houses, which had been scattered on farms across the town in the 18th century, became concentrated at the town center during the Federal period. Most of the period's two-story houses are simply detailed center-chimney structures with hip roofs and five-by-one-bay plans; the center-chimney, one-room deep plan indicates some conservatism and economic restraint even for two-story houses. Further indication of this can be gained from the existence of several hip-roof, twin rear-wall chimney houses, another modest form of comparative regional scarcity. Of these houses, most incorporate segmental arched surrounds at the entrance with sidelights but no transom or fan light. One more elaborate double-pile hip-roof Federal house is known at the town center. Houses of less than five-bays' width are known including a three-quarter house of 1784 and a well-detailed end-chimney Federal house on Mary's Pond Road. Cottages are by comparison far more numerous with examples along almost every road in town, particularly on Snipatuit, Rounseville, Marion Neck and Mattapoissett Roads. Most of these are conservative in form with central-chimney plans remaining common through the end of the period; center-entered, double-celled plans predominate with only a few lesser half and three-quarter plan cottages known. One Federal double cottage with end chimneys is known, on Snipatuit Road. Like their two-story contemporaries, the more ambitious cottages incorporate segmental-arched door surrounds.

Institutional: In 1799, the district system was adopted in Rochester (which then included Marion and Mattapoisett) and 16 schools established; perhaps as many as half of these probably stood in Rochester. In 1821, the area was redistricted to 22 schools and an additional five schools were built. It is not known that any of these have survived although the later conversion of schools to residential use indicates potential survival. In 1811, a Town House (demolished 1892) was erected on the Common at Rochester Center; a very plain, one-story, hip-roof structure with a small square cupola, the Town House was extremely conservative for its time, based as it was on the traditional square hip-roofed form of the earliest 17th-century meetinghouse and court houses. In marked contrast -- is the fourth meetinghouse (1826, Solomon K. Eaton): for the region, it is a rare and progressive Gothic Revival design comprised of a one-and-a-half story gable-roofed auditorium with storage tower with quatrefoil and lancet windows. A Baptist Church was established at Rochester in 1793 with a Methodist church at Snipatuit Pond founded C. 1830. This church, a two-and-a-half story Federal/Greek Revival building, still stands on North Avenue.

Industrial: A well-preserved grist mill (C. 1800) still stands on Mary's Pond Road at Sippican; the complex includes a story-and-a-half gambrel-roofed building with several other buildings dating to the mid 19th century. Its millrace is intact.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Highways intact from early 19th century with mainline of Cape Cod railroad from Middleborough across northeast swamplands (1847).

B. Population:

Steady increase to 1840 then no growth to 1850. Sharp drop in 1860 due to incorporation of Marion in 1852 and Mattapoisett in 1857, continued decline to the end of the period. Foreign born population in 1855, 115 principally Irish.

C. Settlement:

Secession of Mattapoisett and Marion remove two largest villages from Rochester. Residential development that does take place occurs at Rochester Center and along major roads.

D. Economic Base:

Most of Rochester's remaining iron activity appears to have disappeared by the 1840's. Rochester's principal product remained lumber -- much of it ship timber -- from her sawmills. In addition, grazing land for sizeable herds of cattle; by 1865, 216 farms were recorded.

With the severing of Mattapoisett and Marion, Old Rochester's two principal business centers, from the parent in the 1850's, the town lost the greater part of her economic life. The fault was further compounded by the construction in the same decade of the Fairhaven Branch Railroad, completely bypassing the inland town.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Several new houses forms developed during the period. A wider range of house sizes were constructed with very small cottages of only three-bays' width constructed for the first time. Although comprised of only two small rooms, these cottages retain the center entrance whenever possible. Another new cottage form of the period is a small square gable-roofed center-chimney cottage of one-room's depth with a center entrance and a one-story ell centered along the rear wall; several examples of this form stand on Snipatuit Road. In both instances, the cottages are side-gabled with the ridge parallel to the front wall. With the appearance of these smaller cottage forms, the traditional five-bay facade cottage became the more ambitious cottage form. Double interior chimneys became more common although the center chimney was used well into the period. The story-and-a-half form was enlarged in the period through the addition of large steeply pitched facade gables, used either in pairs or more commonly, as a single feature centered on the front wall; three-bay one-story sidewall ells further enlarged the cottage. Facade gables suggest the influence of the Gothic Revival but most period cottages have Greek Revival detailing, the later examples incorporating kneewall framing and Italianate hoods and brackets. The town center continued to be the focus of the most ambitious construction with several Italianate villas, rare for the region, built during the period, including the Weld House (C. 1860) with a low hip-roof, four-square plan and unusual roundhead windows projecting into the cornice. Although two-story houses are not common, broad-gabled story-and-a-half Greek Revival/Italianate houses incorporating an additional half-story attic were built in some numbers during the period, especially at the town center. The sidehall plan is very unusual and was used primarily for two-story Italianate houses of the 1860's such as the farmhouse at Hiller and Mary's Pond Roads.

Institutional: In 1839, the Rochester Academy, a two-story, gable-roofed Greek Revival building with a square belfry, was built on the Common. Also built was the North Congregational church (1841, Solomon K. Eaton), and one-and-a-half story Greek Revival church with a pedimented end gable, pilastered three-bay facade and square belfry with acroteria.

IV. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation:

Road and rail system maintained from mid-19th century with Middleborough-Wareham trolley line across northeast swamplands parallel to railroad (1901).

B. Population:

Population remains static from 1870 to 1900, slight increase at end of period with mild fluctuations. Foreign born population 46 in 1885 increases to 243 in 1915 (almost 1/2 Portuguese).

C. Settlement:

Some residential development along existing roads.

D. Economic Base:

By the 1870's many mill sites had been turned to box board and shingle manufacture. Wrote the Plymouth County Directory,

"the occupation of the people is chiefly agricultural, and considerable attention is paid in the winter to the sawing and preparing for market of a large amount of box boards."

Thirteen sawmills were recorded in 1875, with a product worth over \$47,000.

No new industry recorded in existing sources, though town probably experienced some increase in cranberry cultivation. Major event of the period was construction, in 1899, of New Bedford Water Works plant on Little Quittacus Pond, a major addition to the city's water supply, though the city had been operating a water-supply system in other towns around New Bedford since the 1860's.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Very little construction took place in the period, although after the turn of the century, at least a few smaller but well-detailed Queen Anne and Colonial Revival cottages, a few with gambrel or jerkin-head roofs were built especially in the western half of town along Perry Hill, Cushman and Hartley Roads. At least one Stick Style cottage is known at Bisbee Corner in North Rochester with other vernacular Queen Anne and late Italianate cottages along the County Road.

Institutional: The present Town House, a well-detailed Queen Anne/Colonial Revival building with turrets, half-timbering and patterned shingle detail, was built on the Common in 1892. Also constructed during the period was the pumping station of the New Bedford Water Works (1899, Rice and Evans), a low Richardsaonian Romanesque building with dormers located off Route 105.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Trolley line to Buzzards Bay abandoned and improvement of local highways as autoroads with Route 105 (Marion-Rounseville-Hartley Roads) through Rochester Center.

B. Population:

Population stayed relatively stable during this period with slight fluctuations. Foreign born population 143 in 1930.

C. Settlement:

Some residential development along existing roads.

D. Economic Base:

No new identified industries. By 1930, sawmills were all that remained of Rochester's manufactures, both operated by families with long mill associations with the town -- the Hartley Sawmill Co. and Rounseville Brothers.

Eastover Farms, operating extensive cranberry bogs, built a modern screen house in 1934.

E. Architecture:

A fair number of simple Craftsmen, Colonial Revival and Dutch Colonial cottages were built in Rochester in the 1920's with concentrations on the western half of town along Cushman, Hartley and Perry Hill Roads as well as at Mary's Pond. More substantial bungalows and at least one Colonial Revival house are known at the town center. A few small one-story frame commercial buildings were built at the town center on Marion Road

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

Industrial: Rochester's survey identified most of the town's surviving industrial resources. Both groupings -- the Leonard Grist Mill/East-over Farm complex and the handsome New Bedford Waterworks and gatehouses -- are probably NR-potential properties.

Further work should be done to identify the town's surviving mill sites. Two sets of ruins from the Hartley and Rounseville sawmills exist within the "Winslow's Mill Area" (MHC Area G) together with a 15-foot span stone-arch bridge carrying Rounseville Road over the upper Mattapoissett River.

Developmental Pressures: No obvious commercial activity except around town center. Outlying districts remain under continual pressure for suburban development especially around Snipatuit and Mary's Ponds, while much of upland area maintained as active farmland.

XII. SOURCES

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