

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

SEEKONK

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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MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL COMMISSION
William Francis Galvin, Secretary of the Commonwealth
Chair, Massachusetts Historical Commission
220 Morrissey Blvd.
Boston, MA 02125
www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc
mhc@sec.state.ma.us / 617-727-8470

MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

Date: October 1981

Community: Seekonk

I. TOPOGRAPHY

Rolling hills with extensive swamp in central portion of the town. Drainage on the west by the Ten Mile River and Runnins River and in the south by Clear Run Brook and Torrey Creek. Soils generally sandy to gravelly.

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

Seekonk was incorporated as a town on February 26, 1812 from the western half of Rehoboth. The northwest quarter of town was incorporated as the town of Pawtucket in 1828. Southwest portion of town was incorporated as East Providence in 1862 with the creation of the Massachusetts-Rhode Island border.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Seekonk is a suburban community on the Massachusetts Rhode Island Border. The town appears to have been a fringe area for native settlement during the Contact period, with some conjectured native sites. European settlement after 1675. Major settlement in Pawtucket/East Providence, Rhode Island area. Part of Rehoboth until 1812, the town when incorporated included Pawtucket and East Providence, Rhode Island. The town as incorporated contained two industrial villages (Pawtucket and East Providence) and an agricultural hinterland (the present town). By 1862 the town lost its industrial base since the focus had originally been the Blackstone/Seekonk River. (Slater's Cotton Mill was also in the original town). Until the development of the electric trolley lines the town remained primarily agricultural; after the installation of the trolleys the town was effectively opened to suburbanization, a function that has intensified in the 20th century.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500 - 1620)

A. Transportation Routes:

Several probable major coastal and riverine access routes passed through the Seekonk area. A conjectured major native trail may have extended from the present Attleboro/Seekonk line south along Route 152, then roughly paralleling the western border of Seekonk and following the southern portion of Arcade Avenue (immediately south of its junction with Route 44), Fall River Avenue and Warren Avenue. Ultimately, this route probably extended to the heavily settled coastal and riverine region encompassing present Swansea, Barrington and Warren (latter two in Rhode Island). A second north-south route possibly branched off of the previous trail extending further east along Walker, Prospect, Lincoln, Bradley, Asylum, Anthony and School Streets. The junction of School Street and Runnins River is likely the site

of a native ford which would have provided access to the Seekonk River area. A probably primary east-west trail extended off of the Tremont Street trail in northern Rehoboth along Cross and Pine Streets and the western portion of Woodlawn Street (intersected the Route 152 trail). The point at which School Street crossed the Tenmile River may have been the site of a native ford. Two conjectured secondary trails possibly following the general routes of Brown and Woodward Avenues linked the Pine Street and Route 152 trails and the Route 152 and Walker Street trails, respectively.

B. Settlement Patterns:

There were no documented native Contact Period sites. A large number (9 of 14 sites) of unidentified native sites were situated in the northern third of Seekonk adjacent to the Pine, Route 152 and Brown Avenue trails. These sites included a large village at the intersection of Newman Avenue and Read Street. All but two of the remaining unidentified sites were situated near the southern portion of the Runnins River. One of these sites was a large village located immediately east of the conjectured School Street native ford. Additional Contact period settlement may have taken place along the southern portion of the Route 152 trail (Arcade Avenue south) and rich agricultural land adjacent to Prospect, Lincoln, Bradley and Asylum Streets (native trail).

C. Subsistence Patterns:

Native fishing in the Seekonk area was probably limited due to the lack of large freshwater streams and rivers. The majority of local fishing likely occurred on the Tenmile and Runnins Rivers, particularly at the ecologically diverse wetland area situated at the School Street native ford. Additional fishing and marine resource collection probably was undertaken in the Warren, Barrington and Seekonk Rivers and Mount Hope and Narragansett Bays. Hunting would have taken place in Seekonk's extensive woodlands and marshlands. Prime agricultural land was concentrated in a north-south corridor described above and along Brown Avenue. The Seekonk area's proximity to Mount Hope and Narragansett Bays, a known region of pre-1620 European-Indian contact, strongly suggests the likelihood of local native trade with Europeans in this area.

D. Observations:

Seekonk was situated on the fringe of the heavily settled riverine and coastal region of southeastern Rhode Island and Massachusetts. The area may have been utilized as settlement sites by the Narragansett (Wampanoags) and Mount Hope Bay native residents during the cooler fall and winter months. Local native settlement probably focused on the agricultural land in the eastern portion of Seekonk and the large unidentified native village west of South Seekonk. The likelihood of surviving evidence of Contact period settlement appears to be greatest along Prospect, Lincoln and Bradley Streets because of a minimum of development in this area.

V. FIRST SETTLEMENT PERIOD (1620 - 1675)

A. Transportation Routes:

There was no documentation of pre-1675 colonial transportation routes. However, it is likely the settlers adapted the existing native trail network to their own transportation needs. Possibly three of the earliest utilized routes were the Pine Street, Route 152 and Walker Street trails. These routes would have provided access to the original Old Rehoboth settlement node situated in Rumford, East Providence and Riverside.

B. Population:

No figures for the native or white population. The first settlers originally were residents of Braintree, Weymouth and Hingham.

C. Settlement Patterns:

Existing secondary sources provide no insight into pre-war native settlement. Scattered English settlement probably occurred shortly after the c. 1643 establishment of the original Old Rehoboth settlement node on the Seekonk River. Location of these pre-1675 settlers is unclear. Local residents attended civic and religious activities in the c. 1646 (Old Rehoboth) meetinghouse in present Rumford, Rhode Island.

D. Economic Base:

The native population probably maintained their traditional subsistence patterns although with increased emphasis on Anglo-Indian trade. No mention of the settlers' economic pursuits. Subsistence agriculture, hunting and lumbering were probably the basis of the colonial economy. Commercial and industrial facilities were likely sought in the Old Rehoboth settlement node.

E. Observations:

The Seekonk colonial settlement was located on the fringe of the original Old Rehoboth settlement. There is a serious need for detailed examination and reconstruction of both the native and English communities existing during this period.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675 - 1775)

A. Transportation Routes:

Minimal description of development of the colonial transportation during the late 17th and 18th centuries.

B. Population:

No figures for the native or white population. Old Rehoboth (included Seekonk) had a population of 3,690 residents in 1765. The population had increased to 4,191 residents in 1776.

C. Settlement Patterns:

It is unclear if a native community survived past King Philip's War. During King Philip's War, the settlers fled the Seekonk area and sought refuge in several garrison houses located in East Providence, North Attleborough and Swansea. Although not mentioned specifically, it is suspected Seekonk suffered heavy damage during the conflict. Sources fail to provide a date for initial post-war settlement. It is likely the first settlers appeared shortly after 1676. A reputed tavern (extant) located near the intersection of Jacob Street and Seekonk's eastern border is said to date to 1670-80. The presence of this public facility and the location of a pre-1795 meetinghouse and adjacent pre-1758 cemetery at the junction of Lake and Lincoln Streets suggest a primary settlement node may have been established in the locale between c. 1676 and the mid-18th century. A possible mid-late 18th century secondary settlement node may have existed in the vicinity of the Old Grist Mill Pond (Mill Road).

D. Economic Base:

No description of the settlement's post-war economic development. Four possible pre-1775 mills may have been erected on the Runnins River at the river's junction with Ledge Street, Fall River Avenue, and School Street and on Clear Run Brook at its junction with Asylum Street respectively.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Several two-story center chimney houses dating from the Colonial period are known to survive in Seekonk. The earliest of these is dated to 1680, just after King Philip's War; this is the Roadside Tavern on Jacobs Street. Extensive alterations to the building appear to have taken place c. 1920. Other better-preserved period houses stand on Prospect and Walker Streets and on Arcade Avenue. Also known is one more elaborate center chimney house with a gable on hip roof, possibly built as late as 1760, which stands on Walnut Street. In addition to the houses noted, several cottages are known to survive as well; all of these are center chimney cottages although at least one cottage was added to later and now stands as a double chimney structure with a house-and-a-half plan. Cottages are known on Elm, Arcade, Walker and Prospect Streets.

F. Observations:

Difficult to assess the extent of the community's development because of the dearth of data dealing with this period. The Seekonk area residents probably had strong social and commercial ties with present Rehoboth since it was not separated from this town until the early 19th century.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775 - 1830)

A. Transportation Routes:

Improvement of existing colonial roads. Providence-Taunton turnpike (Winthrop Street) completed 1829.

B. Population:

Population figures unavailable prior to incorporation in 1812. The decade for which figures are available, 1820-1830, indicates a decline due to the incorporation of Pawtucket Village in 1828.

C. Settlement:

Majority of settlement in present town boundaries consisted of farmsteads along colonial roads. Principle industrial nodes at Pawtucket Village and East Providence, both now in Rhode Island.

D. Economic Base:

Within present bounds of the town, Seekonk was entirely an agricultural community, though small mills had been established on the Tenmile and Runnins Rivers.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Several Federal period houses were noted in Seekonk, although very few are recorded in the existing inventory of the town. Center-chimney houses were observed in almost equal numbers with end and double-chimney examples. Period houses were observed on County Street, Prospect Street, Asylum Street, Pine Street, Newman and Fall River Avenues. Although some of the houses have lost their trim, at least a few retain well detailed elements; particularly notable was the use of a door surround with flat entablature supported on attenuated consoles ornamented with floral swags. The most outstanding Federal house standing in Seekonk is the Simeon Martin House (1801) on County Street. A hip-roofed, end chimney house with a free-standing Doric portico, the house was remodelled in 1957 and at that time it lost much of its original detailing which included a high monitor, pedimented dormers, and Chiness Chippendale balustrades. Houses of similar pretension are unknown in the town. In addition to the houses noted, center and end chimney cottages were observed on Fall River, Newman and Arcade Avenues at Seekonk and along outlying roads in the eastern half of town.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830 - 1870)

A. Transportation Routes:

Boston and Providence Railroad opened through northern portion of town in 1835. Otherwise improvement of existing roads.

B. Population:

Population decline continues in the decade 1830-1849, then 20 years of increase. The cession of territory to Rhode Island which resulted in the incorporation of East Providence in 1861 resulted in a sharp decline in population at the end of the period. Foreign born population minimal in 1855.

C. Settlement:

With the incorporation of East Providence, the town lost its last major industrial node. Settlement pattern basically linear with small commercial

nodes at Perkins Bridge Station and Perkins Station on the Boston and Providence Railroad.

D. Economic Base:

Boston & Providence Railroad built through the northwest corner of the town, 1834-45, though without appreciable impact on town. In 1865 166 farms recorded.

The town was devastated in 1862 when by agreement between the governments in Boston and Providence, Seekonk was deprived of approximately half of its territory, two thirds of the town valuation, more than two thirds of its population, and virtually all of its manufacturing--primarily important cotton mills along the lower stretches of the Tenmile River. No act of surgery could have been more severe.

To some extent, Seekonk residents appear to have brought the action on themselves. In 1858 the Rumford Chemical Works was removed from Pleasant Valley, Rhode Island to what was then Seekonk. A partisan supporter of the industry described what followed:

Prosecutions were foolishly carried on by some of the inhabitants against the Works as a nuisance, but these were eventually ended by the settlement of the boundary line between Massachusetts and Rhode Island, which Mr. Wilson [George F. Wilson, owner of the works] and his friends had vigorously pushed on to its issue, and by which the westerly portion of Seekonk, on which are situated the Rumford Chemical Works, became a part of Rhode Island. Thus were the complaints under the Massachusetts law quashed, and Rhode Island gained one of the most important of her manufactories, while she has nothing of which she may more properly boast as more valuable to the well-being of the race in general. [Great Industries, 1107-8.]

E. Architecture:

Residential: Clusters of houses and cottages built in the period are located on Fall River Avenue at South Seekonk, at Fall River and County Streets at Seekonk and north of Seekonk along Newman Avenue. Modest houses were also built in some numbers along outlying roads to the east of the town center especially along Lincoln Street. Most of these are simply-detailed Greek Revival structures with either end-chimney, center-entrance or sidehall plans. At least one end-chimney Greek Revival/Italianate house with a monitor roof was noted on Walker Street. Although most of the houses and cottages built after the 1850s incorporate elements of both the Greek Revival and Italianate styles, a few well developed Italianate houses were noted including one unusual L-plan cottage with a square tower located on Prospect Street. Other houses and cottages of the 1850s and '60s were observed on Newman and Fall River Avenues.

Institutional: At least two institutional structures of the period are known, the Seekonk Grange, a two-story, center-entrance Italianate building on Fall River Avenue at South Seekonk, and the First Parish church, a one-story building with a one-stage belfry (c. 1850) on County Street.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870 - 1915)

A. Transportation Routes:

Interstate Street Railway 1891 along Central Avenue, then across Tenmile River. Providence and Taunton Street Railway along Winthrop Street. Improvement of existing roads.

B. Population:

This period was one of slow but steady growth to the end of the century, then the beginnings of rapid growth to the end of the period. Foreign born population goes from just under 10% in 1885 to approximately 25% in 1915. Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Catholic Church built on Lincoln Street and Winthrop between 1904 and 1910.

C. Settlement:

Some new residential construction as infill along existing roads and along trolley lines. Conjectured suburban function for northern portion of town adjacent to Pawtucket.

D. Economic Base:

The town remained wholly agricultural, though some local production of small beer reported in 1875. Early in the present century, Elijah Kent, who operated a turning shop on the upper reaches of the Tenmile River, converted his privilege to manufacture of tennis racquets and croquet sets, incorporating as the Kent Manufacturing Company. With the opening of the Providence and Taunton Street Railway, Seekonk became increasingly a residential suburb of Providence.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Intensive residential construction occurred in the northern half of town during the Late Industrial period, particularly in the years around 1900. Suburban development with a mix of one and two-story houses took place along Central and Newman Avenues with well detailed Colonial Revival and Craftsman houses built on Central Avenue with smaller more modestly detailed Craftsman cottages located on the sidestreets behind Central Avenue. Other less concentrated suburban residential construction occurred along County Road and Fall River Avenue at Seekonk and along Fall River Avenue in a linear pattern at South Seekonk. In addition, a few very well detailed and probably architect-designed houses were constructed on Prospect Street after the turn of the century. These include a stone Queen Anne house of considerable pretension on Lincoln Avenue at Lake Street as well as several Colonial Revival houses on Prospect Street. A very few two-family houses were built in the northern half of town.

Institutional: A number of modest institutional buildings were constructed during the period, particularly after the turn of the century. Among these are the Mount Carmel church (c. 1915), a one-story Gothic Revival chapel on Taunton Avenue, and at least three schools (Green, Newman Avenue and North Schools), all well detailed brick Colonial Revival buildings, one story in height with hip roofs.

Commercial: A few commercial buildings at North Seekonk may have been built in the period along with some commercial buildings at South Seekonk and along Taunton Avenue (Route 44). A small, hip-roofed building observed on Central Avenue may be a trolley waiting room.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915 - 1940)

A. Transportation Routes:

Winthrop Street designated as Route 101 (now Route 44) in 1930s. Providence and Taunton Street Railway line goes to buses in 1928.

B. Population:

Except for the depression decade the population of Seekonk experienced almost exponential growth during the Early Modern and post World War II periods.

C. Settlement:

Some residential development in northern portion of town primarily as suburb of Pawtucket. Other development in southern portion of town possible East Providence suburb. Other residential development primarily infill along existing roads.

D. Economic Base:

No new identified industry. Kent Mfg. Co. in operation throughout period, though agricultural production declined in the face of rapidly growing suburban population.

E. Architecture:

Residential: Seekonk apparently began to function as a rural suburb of East Providence during the period; this is evident in the fact that many older houses, particularly in the eastern half of the town, were remodelled during the period. Many older farmsteads were converted to chicken production and had long one and two-story coops built amidst existing outbuildings. In addition, modestly detailed cottages were built into the 1920s at North Seekonk and across the western half of town with a few larger and more elaborately detailed Craftsman houses built in the eastern section of the town.

Institutional: Only one institutional building was observed for the period; this is the Church of the Holy Nativity (1923) on County Street, a one-story chapel with a belfry.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

Seekonk's survey consists of some one dozen inventory forms, nearly all of which document houses of the 18th century. A number of well detailed Federal houses stand in the town and need documentation; in addition, there are many good Greek Revival, Italianate, Queen Anne and Colonial Revival houses scattered across the town. Concentrations of significant houses stand along Prospect/Lincoln Streets and along Newman/Central Streets as well as at South Seekonk. The section of Prospect Street between Walker and Lake Streets is particularly well preserved with Colonial through mid-19th century farmsteads and Early Modern suburban development of architect-designed Colonial Revival houses.

Industrial: Two potentially industrial sites were identified by the reconnaissance survey: the Kent Mfg. Co. buildings on the Tenmile River, possibly incorporating part of the late-19th-century turning mill; and what is now the "Old Grist Mill Tavern," part of which is thought to date to 1745. (Some doubt is thrown on this hypothesis by the presence of the date "1745" scrawled on a stone of a patently mid-20th century chimney; photos in the Seekonk Library show the late-19th-century building form.)

XII. SOURCES

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Great Industries of the United States (Hartford, 1873).