AYER RECONNAISSANCE REPORT

FREEDOM'S WAY LANDSCAPE INVENTORY

MASSACHUSETTS HERITAGE LANDSCAPE INVENTORY PROGRAM

Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation

Freedom's Way Heritage Association

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Cover Photographs
Eliades Barn and Field, Ayer/Groton Road
Planter next to Town Hall
Pleasant Street School

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INTRODUCTION

The Freedom's Way Heritage Association includes 37 Massachusetts communities that are linked by historic events that helped to shape America's democratic form of governance and the intellectual traditions that underpin American freedom, democracy, conservation and social justice. Freedom's Way communities extend from Arlington on the east to Winchendon on the west. They represent a wide range of cities and towns, each shaped by the relationship between nature and culture.

Heritage landscapes are special places created by human interaction with the natural environment that help define the character of a community and reflect its past. They are dynamic and evolving; they reflect the history of a community and provide a sense of place; they show the natural ecology that influenced land use patterns; and they often have scenic qualities. The wealth of landscapes is central to each community's character, yet heritage landscapes are vulnerable and ever changing. For this reason it is important to take the first steps towards their preservation by identifying those landscapes that are particularly valued by the community – a favorite local farm, a distinctive neighborhood or mill village, a unique natural feature or an important river corridor. To this end, the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) and the Freedom's Way Heritage Association (FWHA) have collaborated to bring the Heritage Landscape Inventory program (HLI) to communities in the Freedom's Way area. The primary goal of the program is to help communities identify a wide range of landscape resources, particularly those that are significant and unprotected. The focus is on landscapes that have not been identified in previous survey efforts in a given community. Another important goal of the program is to provide communities with strategies for preserving heritage landscapes.

The methodology for the Heritage Landscape Inventory program was developed in a pilot project conducted in southeast Massachusetts and refined in Essex County. It is outlined in the DCR publication *Reading the Land* which has provided guidance for the program since its inception. In summary, each participating community appoints a Local Project Coordinator (LPC) to assist the DCR-FWHA consulting team. The LPC organizes a heritage landscape identification meeting at which interested residents and town officials offer community input by identifying heritage landscapes. This meeting is followed by a fieldwork session including the consulting team and the LPC, often accompanied by other community members. This group visits the priority landscapes identified in the meeting and gathers information about the community. The final product is this Reconnaissance Report, prepared for each participating community. It outlines the history of the community; describes the priority heritage landscapes; discusses planning issues identified by the town; identifies planning tools available in the community; and concludes with preservation recommendations. A list of all of the heritage landscapes identified by the community is included in the Appendix.

AYER HISTORY

The Native American history of Ayer dates to the Early Woodland Period (3,000-2,000 B.P.*) with confirmed sites from this period and the Late Woodland Period (1,000-450 B.P.). The land along the Nashua River made good campsites with hunting and fishing nearby. Contact Period Nipmuck sites are suspected along the Nashua River, Nonacoicus Brook, Long Pond and Sandy Pond. Native American trails included Sandy Pond/Main Street along Nonacoicus Brook.

Ayer was initially part of the Groton Plantation and the area was slow to develop because of its remoteness and frontier instability. There were a few scattered European settlers in the late 17th century but the number was small until after 1740. Agriculture and grazing were the mainstay of the economy in the 18th century, with Pierce's grist and sawmill on Nonacoicus Brook from 1770 onward. Even after the Revolutionary War, the area remained sparsely settled with only a dozen or so farms. Despite good opportunities for waterpower, the area was too remote to develop as a manufacturing center.

The arrival of the Fitchburg Railroad line in 1845, followed by several others, made Ayer a transportation hub in the mid-19th century. Although still part of Groton, Ayer grew rapidly during this period with a large influx of immigrants (primarily Irish) and greater diversity of religions represented. Most new settlement occurred in the vicinity of Main and Park Streets. The Ames Plow Company, built in 1850, was the first large-scale industry to locate here, followed by a large tannery. Housing stock greatly expanded during this period and new churches were built. By 1856 the area was known as Groton Junction and was a major railroad center.

Ayer was incorporated as a town in 1871. In the late 19th century the Shoddy Mill was built by William Mitchell at Mitchellville and two furniture factories were established in Ayer Center. Much of the commercial center was destroyed by fire in 1872 and rebuilt in brick. Late 19th century civic and institutional buildings from around that time included schools, town hall and library.

Camp Devens (later renamed Fort Devens) was established in 1917 as a military training center. By 1940 it was the largest military installation in New England. Although most of Fort Devens was in Harvard, large numbers of military personnel and families lived in Ayer for nearly 75 years, heavily influencing all aspects of the town. Fort Devens was decommissioned in 1996 and is now administered by the Devens Enterprise Commission. The area is no longer considered part of Ayer. In 2000, Ayer had a population of 6,373.

* Before the present era, which is considered to be 1950.

PRIORITY HERITAGE LANDSCAPES

Ayer's Heritage Landscape Identification meeting, attended by approximately 14 residents, some representing town boards and local non-profit organizations was held on April 20, 2006. During the meeting residents compiled a lengthy list of the town's heritage landscapes, which is included in the Appendix. Once the comprehensive list was created, attendees were asked to articulate the value of each landscape and the issues relating to its preservation. Based on the information gathered, community members identified a group of priority landscapes to be visited by the consulting team during the fieldwork. Each of the priority landscapes is highly valued, contributes to community character and is not permanently protected or preserved.

These landscapes, which are listed alphabetically, represent a range of scales and types of resources from individual sites such as Carlton Circle to entire neighborhoods. Several of the priority landscapes describe areas that have multiple layers. For example a neighborhood that that is considered a heritage landscape may also include specific features within it that are also individually recognized as heritage landscapes. Such layering shows the complexity and interdependence that are characteristic of most heritage landscapes. The descriptions and recommendations included here are an initial step in identifying resources valued by the community and suggesting action strategies.

Frederick Carlton Circle

The main point of entry into Ayer from the south is via Harvard Road (Route 110/111) and from the east is via Littleton Road (Route 110/2A). These two roads converge at Frederick Carlton Circle, a five-way junction that also includes Barnum Road, Sandy Pond Road and East Main Street (Route 111/2A). All three numbered routes are designated as minor arterial/major collectors. The large heavily landscaped circle, located just east of the downtown area, is an important gateway to the town. There is also a secondary triangular green space at the northwestern edge of the circle between the eastbound and westbound travel lanes of East Main Street which makes that area feel somewhat like a parkway. Residents value the rural character of the circle as an entry point into the community and are anxious to see it preserved.

Recommendations

Conceptual plans completed by Mass Development in anticipation of additional growth at Devens propose elimination of the rotary and replacement with traffic lights. The town’s 2004 Comprehensive Plan Update indicates that the rotary functions well as is and recommends revisiting the proposed modifications and carefully investigating other alternatives, including improvements to the existing rotary without the installation of signals. Two actions that would help to put the town in a better negotiating position are:

- Require a thorough evaluation of capacity and safety ramifications before a design is finalized.

- Document the history of Carlton Circle on a Massachusetts Historical Commission (MHC) inventory form prior to finalizing a design for the roadway improvements.

MacPherson Road

MacPherson Road extends along the east side of the Nashua River between Bishop Road on the north and West Main Street on the south. It is presently a two-lane paved road that is valued by community residents for its rural and scenic qualities. Land along the Nashua River and MacPherson Road is controlled by U.S. Fish & Wildlife as part of the Oxbow National Wildlife Refuge. This area is also in the Squannassit Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) and has been identified by the Massachusetts Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program as a priority habitat.

MacPherson Road functions as an important connector in the western part of town, alleviating traffic congestion at the Park Street/Main Street intersection and connecting with the Verbeck Gate, the main entry into Devens from Ayer. Part of the road corridor is subject to periodic flooding. The current proposal is to upgrade MacPherson Road to accommodate additional traffic in the western part of town, especially increased traffic associated with development at Devens. Some residents expressed concern that the proposed roadway improvements would adversely affect wildlife and environmental quality in this ecologically sensitive area. The area also has a high likelihood of having archaeological resources associated with Native American use of the river corridor.

Recommendations

Finding a balance with these roadway issues will require thoughtful dialogue among town departments (Selectmen, Conservation Commission, Historical Commission) representing various points of view, as well as Mass Development and Mass Highway.

- Establish a scenic roads bylaw as recommended in the Comprehensive Plan Update and designate MacPherson Road as a scenic road. This will provide more flexibility for creating a design that is sensitive to the unique characteristics of the road corridor.

- Document historic and archaeological resources along MacPherson Road on MHC inventory forms.

- Review documentation of natural resources along MacPherson Road and determine if additional study is needed, particularly with regard to specific species or impacts. Prepare a mitigation plan that reduces the potential impacts of proposed roadway improvements and increased traffic on wildlife and flooding.

Main Street Commercial District

Main Street, which runs east/west through the center of town, is the primary civic and commercial district in Ayer. The downtown area burned in 1872 and most of the extant buildings date to the late 19th and early 20th century. The Main Street commercial district includes a variety of one to four-story building types, many built in masonry after the fire. Today the main commercial area lies between Park Street on the west and the 1949 Main Street B & M Railroad Bridge on the east. There is also an overhead railroad bridge on West Main Street. The most noteworthy commercial building is the Page/Moore Block at 33-47 Main Street which was built immediately after the fire. This four-story Italianate building occupies a full block and has a notable awning that extends out over the sidewalk, spanning the entire façade. The most important civic building is the handsome town hall, a High Victorian Gothic structure that was built in 1873. It has recently been renovated and received a preservation award from the Massachusetts Historical Commission. Adjacent to it is a newly constructed park between the Town Hall and the 1898 Classical Revival Bank building.

Recommendations

There are two primary issues associated with the Main Street commercial district. The town has already taken important steps to preserve the historic fabric of the area by listing it in the National Register of Historic Places but may also wish to consider other preservation mechanisms. The other major concern is ensuring the economic vitality of the downtown area. Review the Plan Update suggests a strategy of promoting small, distinctive businesses and targeting commuters who park at the depot in the town center and develop partnerships with key organizations to help pursue this strategy. Ayer is already using grant money for façade and improvements, an important step towards supporting local businesses and enhancing the downtown streetscape.

- Consider establishing a neighborhood architectural conservation district which is less restrictive than a local historic district. For additional information about neighborhood architectural conservation districts and other **strategies for preserving historic neighborhoods** see the General Preservation Planning Recommendations section of this report.

- Develop design and sign guidelines as recommendations for rehabilitation projects.

North Washington Street Agricultural Area

Between 1971 and 1999 Ayer lost more than half of its agricultural land, leaving only 125 acres, most of which is hayed. The two remaining farms on the east side of Ayer/Groton Road (also known as North Washington Street) are evocative of this aspect of the community's past. While neither farm is intensively farmed any longer, there are expansive areas of hay fields, two large barns and some other farm buildings. The Eliades Barn, a long red New England barn with rooftop clerestory, is dramatically sited back from the road in the midst of a rolling hay field. The Smith Farm slightly to the south includes house and barn complex located closer to the road. Some cluster development has already occurred on former Smith Farm land but the remainder of the land is under a conservation restriction so no further development will occur. Proposed hospital expansion on the west side of the road opposite the Smith Farm could impact the rural agricultural character of the neighborhood.

Recommendations

Documentation of historic resources is an important step towards preservation, as is working with the property owners to pursue whether preservation strategies should be considered. The Historical Commission is responsible for documentation. All town land use boards and commissions can work together to find solutions to preserving at least some aspects of these farms.

- Document farms on MHC area forms. Include history and description of farming activities as well as the historic farm structures and landscape.

- Assemble an informal group to formulate a plan for preservation should the land associated with either farm become available.

- Consider purchase options, preservation and conservation restrictions. The Planning Board, Conservation Commission, Historical Commission and local non-profit organizations should consult with owners to determine appropriate preservation strategies.

- If development is inevitable explore ways to do partial development using the Cluster Development Bylaw as has already been done at the Smith Farm.

Pleasant Street/Washington Street Neighborhood

The Pleasant Street/Washington Street neighborhood, which lies immediately north of the town center, consists of a mix of late 19th and early 20th century wood frame houses in a range of styles including Queen Anne, Shingle and Colonial Revival. In general the properties along Washington Street are larger houses set on more spacious lots, with almost all initially intended as single family residences, while the houses on Pleasant Street and many of the side streets are generally smaller and include some multi-family houses. Local

residents value the neighborhood because of its tree-lined streets, spacious lawns, well-kept houses, visual variety and proximity to downtown.

A particularly important property in this neighborhood is the Pleasant Street School, an early 20th century Colonial Revival building that is no longer needed for school purposes, but which is the only building in Ayer individually listed in the National Register. The Historical Commission has been working for many years to try to find an appropriate adaptive use.

Recommendations

As housing needs change, some of the older residences are perceived as out of date or the wrong size for current needs. Residents were concerned about the potential loss of historic housing stock through tear-downs or neglect. The Historical Commission should take the lead in documenting and preserving this historic neighborhood and encourage the town to find a new use for the Pleasant Street School.

- Document Pleasant Street neighborhood on MHC inventory forms. Use building forms for noteworthy houses and an area form to provide an overview of the whole neighborhood.

- Consider sponsoring a lecture or walking tour to highlight the unique aspects of this neighborhood.

- Consider establishing a neighborhood architectural conservation district which is less restrictive than a local historic district. For additional information about **strategies for preserving historic neighborhoods** see the General Preservation Planning Recommendations section of this report.

Railroad Station and Related Artifacts

In the 19th century Ayer was an important railroad junction with three railroad lines traveling through town. The Fitchburg line of the Boston and Maine Railroad, which runs east/west through the center of town, is now the only active line. One issue associated with the railroad is the presence of a number of railroad artifacts (turntable, signal tower, track switch, bridges, abandoned rail lines) which tell an important story associated with the railroad history of Ayer. Many of these features are small and ephemeral and their value might not be recognized. The other issue, which is of particular concern to Ayer residents, is a proposal that the present stops at Ayer and Shirley might be consolidated into a single stop at Devens. Both communities are concerned that such a change would adversely impact their town centers, which rely on business traffic associated with the railroad.

Recommendations

- Work closely with the town of Shirley and Mass Development to resolve issues regarding station location. Emphasize the importance of the railroad to Ayer's downtown economy, which relies heavily on walk-in commuter trade.
- Document railroad artifacts on MHC inventory forms to provide a record of what currently exists.
- Develop a feasibility study for a possible railroad park that would preserve railroad artifacts and bring much needed green space to the downtown area. Consider working with the department of landscape architecture from a local college such as the Conway School or the University of Massachusetts.

West Main Street Neighborhood

The West Main Street neighborhood is a small enclave of residential properties on the north side of the street. It includes a line of modest gable-front Greek Revival houses as well as two larger multi-family dwellings that have some Greek Revival detailing. While some of these buildings have been covered with siding, they include a range of 19th century styles such as Italianate and Stick Style and many include architectural features such as bracketed door hoods. These dwellings also provide housing stock near the downtown area that offers a range of residential options. On the south side of West Main Street is the St. Mary's Catholic Church campus, also an important local feature. As with other historic neighborhoods, the first important step is documentation, which is the responsibility of the Historical Commission.

Recommendations

- Document West Main Street neighborhood on MHC inventory forms to provide a record of what currently exists. Use building forms for noteworthy houses and an area form to provide an overview of the whole neighborhood.
- Consider sponsoring a lecture or walking tour to highlight the unique aspects of this neighborhood.

CRITICAL CONCERNS

In addition to the priority landscapes listed in the previous section, residents also identified critical concerns related to heritage landscapes and community character. Critical concerns are town-wide issues that are linked to a range or category of heritage landscapes, not to a particular place. They are listed in alphabetical order. Community members also expressed interest in learning about preservation tools and strategies that have been effective in other Massachusetts communities and in identifying sources for preservation funding.

Forested Lands

Ayer has relatively little open space for a town its size and much of what exists is forest and wetland that is not permanently protected. Roughly 20% of the town's total acreage or 1,200 acres is considered open space. All of the permanently protected open space is owned by a public entity such as the town or state and federal agencies. The *Plan Update* identified several strategies for open space acquisition: establishing clear priorities based on town needs, encouraging compact development patterns that maximize open space and establishing partnerships with private land owners and conservation groups to work towards common goals.

Pond Access

Ayer has a series of ponds that extend from east to west across the community. Three of the ponds Long, Sandy and Spectacle, are state designated great ponds (over 10 acres) so they must be kept open for public access. Residents expressed several concerns about the ponds. The first was that most of the shoreline of the ponds is occupied by private residents so that public access points are limited. Two other concerns included the poor water quality of the ponds and the presence of emergent vegetation in several of them. In part this is perpetuated by development close to the pond's shoreline.

Scenic Roads and Stone Walls

One of the ways that Ayer residents perceive their town is via the public roads, many of which retain their historic alignment, narrow road width and scenic views over open fields. Stone walls line many of Ayer's more rural roads and delineate the boundaries of former farm fields. Especially important is the very long stone wall that runs from Stratton Hill to the Gun Club parallel to the wires. For additional information about **scenic roads** see the General Preservation Planning Recommendations section of this report.

EXISTING RESOURCE DOCUMENTATION AND PLANNING TOOLS

Ayer already has important planning tools in place to document current conditions within the town; identify issues of concern to town residents; and develop strategies for action. This section of the Reconnaissance Report identifies some of the existing planning documents and tools that provide information relevant to the Heritage Landscape Inventory program.

Inventory of Historic and Archaeological Assets

The Massachusetts Historical Commission's (MHC) Inventory of Historic and Archaeological Assets is a statewide list that identifies significant historic resources throughout the Commonwealth. In order to be included in the inventory, a property must be documented on an MHC inventory form, which is then entered into the MHC database. This searchable database, known as MACRIS, is now available online at http://www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc.

According to the MHC, Ayer's inventory documents about 150 historic resources ranging from 1787 to 1979. These include many properties in the former Fort Devens as well as properties in the Main Street Historic District and a few residential and industrial properties.

Ayer has three documented ancient Native American sites dating back to the Early Woodland Period (3,000-2,000 B.P.) and seven documented historic archaeological sites, most of which are associated with the Devens North Post. This level of documentation is low for what the presumed archaeology for the region is. It is likely that there is significantly more archaeology potential due to the richness of the Nashua River region.

State and National Registers of Historic Places

The National Register of Historic Places is the official federal list of districts, sites, buildings, structures and objects that have been determined significant in American history, architecture, archaeology, engineering and culture. The Pleasant Street School is the only property in Ayer that is individually listed in the National Register. There are two National Register districts, the Fort Devens Historic District (located in both Ayer and Harvard, which is also a local historic district with 58 resources) and the Ayer Main Street Historic District with 22 resources. The Ayer Town Hall also has a preservation restriction, filed under

the state statute, M.G.L. Chapter 184, Sections 31-33. Preservation restrictions (PR) run with the deeds and are one of the strongest preservation strategies available. All National Register listings, local historic district listings and properties that have preservation restrictions are automatically listed in the State Register.

Planning Documents and Tools

In 2004 Ayer completed its Comprehensive Plan Update which addresses a range of planning issues including: land use, open space, resource protection, housing, economic development, transportation and community facilities. The Update also includes a detailed implementation plan and integrates information from Ayer's latest Open Space and Recreation Plan. The Resource Protection goals contained in the Update address several of the priority landscapes identified in the Heritage Landscape Identification meeting. Ayer also has a Community-wide Preliminary Historic Resources Survey Plan completed in 2003 that provides detailed information on past efforts to document historic resources in Ayer. It includes a prioritized survey action plan for the community that is consistent with the recommendations of the Heritage Landscape inventory.

Ayer has established overlay zoning districts for some special uses and also has a flood plain district, water supply district and aquifer protection district. Ayer also has design review, site plan review for commercial and industrial developments and performance standards that apply town-wide. The Ayer Economic Development Office has an active sign and façade grant program.

Ayer passed the Community Preservation Act in 2001 with a 1% surcharge on real estate taxes; the proceeds of which must be used for historic preservation, open space and affordable housing. Many of the recommendations included in this Reconnaissance Report can be funded with CPA money. CPA money has already been used for historic survey and for making Sandy Pond Beach ADA compliant.

GENERAL PRESERVATION PLANNING RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations pertaining to priority heritage landscapes can be found beginning on page 3. This section of the Reconnaissance Report offers more general recommendations relevant to preserving the character of the community that would be applicable to a wide range of community resources.

Ayer's residents place high value on the community's strong sense of place, which is created by its varied natural features and land use patterns that made use of the fertile land. The town has already taken measures to document and evaluate its most significant buildings and natural areas. It is now looking beyond the traditional resources to the landscapes, streetscapes, rural roads, urban neighborhoods and other natural and cultural assets that define the overall fabric of the community. Like most municipalities, Ayer is facing multiple pressures for change that threaten land-based uses and natural resources, especially its remaining farming areas. Special places within the community that were once taken for granted are now more vulnerable than ever to change.

Preservation planning is a three-step process: **identification, evaluation** and **protection**. Four useful documents to consult before beginning to implement preservation strategies are:

- Department of Conservation and Recreation, *Reading the Land*
- Freedom's Way Heritage Association, *Feasibility Study*
- Massachusetts Historical Commission, *Survey Manual*
- Massachusetts Historical Commission, *Preservation through Bylaws and Ordinances*

Recommendations that apply to a broad range of resources are discussed below. These recommendations are listed in the order in which they are most logically addressed when applying the three-step preservation planning process as described above. Thus the goal will be to (1) identify, (2) evaluate, (3) protect.

Inventory of Heritage Landscapes and Other Historic Assets

The vital first step in developing preservation strategies for heritage landscapes is to record information about the resources on MHC inventory forms. One cannot advocate for something unless one knows precisely what it is – the physical characteristics and the historical development. The resources discussed in this Reconnaissance Report that have not been documented should be included in the next inventory project. Thus, using the Massachusetts Historical Commission survey methodology:

- Compile a list of resources that are under-represented or not sufficiently documented, beginning with heritage landscapes.

- Document unprotected resources first, beginning with the most threatened resources.

- Make sure to document secondary features on rural and residential properties, such as outbuildings, stone walls and landscape elements.

- Record a wide range of historic resources including landscape features and industrial resources.

- Conduct a community-wide archaeological reconnaissance survey to identify patterns of ancient Native American and historic occupation and to identify known and probable locations of archaeological resources associated with these patterns. Known and potential ancient Native American and historic archaeological sites should be documented in the field for evidence of their cultural association and/or integrity. All survey work should be completed by a professional archaeologist who meets the professional qualifications (950 CMR 70.01) outlined in the State Archaeologist Permit Regulations (950 CMR 70.00). The Inventory of Archaeological Assets of the Commonwealth contains sensitive information about archaeological sites. The inventory is confidential; it is not a public record (G.L. c. 9, ss. 26A (1)). Care should be taken to keep archaeological site information in a secure location with restricted access. Refer to the MHC article "Community-Wide Archaeological Surveys" which appeared in the Preservation Advocate, Fall 2005 which can be found at the following MHC link:http://www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc/mhcpdf/pafall05.pdf.

National Register Program

Survey work will require an evaluation as to whether resources meet the qualifications for National Register listing. Using the information generated in the survey work and the accompanying National Register evaluations, Ayer should expand its National Register program to augment the National Register districts and single property listing that already exist.

- Develop a National Register listing plan, taking into consideration a property's integrity and vulnerability. Properties that are in need of recognition in order to advance preservation strategies should be given priority.

Downtown and Neighborhood Character

Nearly all preservation strategies address neighborhood character in some manner. As described above, thorough documentation on MHC inventory forms is an important first step in the preservation planning process, followed by National Register listing where appropriate. There are three traditional preservation strategies that have been effective in other communities similar to Ayer: a demolition delay bylaw, a local historic district bylaw (in accordance with M.G.L. Chapter 40C) and designation, and a neighborhood architectural conservation district bylaw and designation.

- **Demolition delay bylaws** provide a time period in which towns can explore alternatives to demolition. Ayer should work with MHC staff to develop a bylaw that would best suit the town and should work with other town groups to publicize the advantages of a demolition delay bylaw to the community. Many demolition delay bylaws apply to structures that were built more than 50 years ago. The most common delay of demolition is six months; however many communities are finding that a one-year delay is more effective. A demolition delay bylaw requires a majority vote of Town Meeting.

- **Local historic districts**, adopted through a local initiative, recognize special areas within a community where the distinctive characteristics of buildings and places are preserved and protected by the designation. These districts are the strongest form of protection for the preservation of historic resources. They are adopted by a 2/3 vote of Town Meeting and are administered by a district commission appointed by the Board of Selectmen. Ayer's downtown commercial district and the Pleasant Street/North Washington Street may benefit from local historic district designation.

- **Neighborhood architectural conservation districts** also are local initiatives that recognize special areas within a community where the distinctive characteristics of buildings and places are preserved and protected. They are less restrictive than local historic districts but still embrace neighborhood character. Neighborhood architectural conservation district designation is appropriate for residential neighborhoods that may have less integrity and where more flexibility is needed. The Ayer Historical Commission should work with MHC staff to determine how a neighborhood conservation district can help to preserve Ayer's town center and residential neighborhoods.

Scenic Roads

Scenic roads are an integral part of the historic fabric of the community. They are highly valued by Ayer residents and visitors alike. They were listed as a critical concern at the Heritage Landscape meeting and also raised as an issue in the Comprehensive Plan Update. However, roads must also accommodate modern transportation needs and decisions regarding roadways are often made with travel requirements as the only consideration. Ayer should consider adopting the Scenic Roads Act (MGL Chapter 40-15C). For roads designated under such a bylaw, there would be review and approval for the removal of trees and stone walls that are within the right-of-way. Yet, in addition to roadway issues, much of what we value about scenic roads – the stone walls, views across open fields – is not within the public right-of-way. The preservation and protection of scenic roads therefore requires more than one approach.

- Complete an inventory with descriptions and photo documentation of each of the roads in Ayer including the character defining features that should be retained.

- Adopt a scenic roads bylaw that designates roads and include design criteria to be considered when approving removal of trees and stone walls, such as a provision allowing only one driveway cut per property on scenic roads. Once adopted, coordinate procedures between Highway Department and Planning Board.

- Consider a scenic overlay district which may provide a no-disturb buffer on private property bordering on scenic roads, or adopt flexible zoning standards to protect certain views. Such bylaws could also be written to apply to the numbered routes, and can therefore include a place like Carlton Circle which is not protected under a scenic roads bylaw.

- Develop policies and implementation standards for road maintenance and reconstruction, including bridge reconstructions and roadway over cow passes, which address the scenic and historic characteristics while also addressing safety. This is an important public process in which the community may have to accept responsibility for certain costs to implement standards that are not acceptable to projects funded by the Massachusetts Highway Department. Such standards should have a section addressing the way in which the local Highway Department maintains roads, for example requiring a public hearing if any additional pavement is to be added to a town road during reconstruction or repair. Policies can be adopted by local boards having jurisdiction over roads, or can be adopted at Town Meeting through a bylaw. In developing policies consider factors such as road width, clearing of shoulders, walking paths and posted speeds. A delicate balance is required.

Funding of Preservation Projects

Funding for preservation projects is an important aspect of implementing preservation strategies. Both the MHC and DCR have had funding programs to assist communities in preservation related issues including:

- **Survey and Planning Grants**, administered by the MHC, support survey, National Register and preservation planning work.
- The **Massachusetts Preservation Projects Fund (MPPF)**, administered by the MHC, funds restoration and rehabilitation projects.
- The **Historic Landscape Preservation Grant Program (HLPGP)**, administered by DCR, funds planning, rehabilitation, education and stewardship projects focused on historic landscapes, including cemeteries.

Funding for state programs varies from year to year. When planning Ayer's heritage landscape inventory program, contact relevant agencies to determine whether funding is available.

Ayer has adopted the **Community Preservation Act (CPA)** and is aware of the number and types of projects that are benefiting from this funding source across the Commonwealth. Ayer projects eligible for CPA funding could include MHC inventory, National Register nominations, cemetery preservation, open space acquisition, preservation or conservation restriction purchase and preservation/restoration of public buildings.

Adoption of the Community Preservation Act, by a majority vote on a ballot question, fosters **partnerships** among historic preservationists, conservationists and affordable housing advocates. At least 10% of the funds must be used to preserve historic resources; at least 10% must be used to protect open space; and at least 10% must be used to advance affordable housing. The remaining 70% must be used for one of these three uses as well as recreational needs and can be distributed in varying proportions depending upon the projects that the town believes are appropriate and beneficial to the municipality. Additional information about the CPA can be found at www.communitypreservation.org.

CONCLUSION

The Ayer Reconnaissance Report is a critical tool in starting to identify the rich and diverse heritage landscapes in Ayer and in beginning to think about preservation strategies. Ayer will have to determine the best way to implement the recommendations discussed above. One approach that might help Ayer begin the process is to form a Heritage Landscape Committee, as described in *Reading the Land*.

Landscapes identified in this report, especially the priority landscapes, will typically need further documentation on MHC inventory forms. That documentation in turn can be used in publicity efforts to build consensus and

gather public support for their preservation. Implementation of recommendations will require a concerted effort of and partnerships among municipal boards and agencies, local non-profit organizations, and state agencies and commissions.

Distribution of this Reconnaissance Report to the municipal land use boards and commissions will assist in making this one of the planning documents that guides Ayer in preserving important features of the community's character. The recommended tasks will require cooperation and coordination among boards and commissions, particularly Ayer's Historical Commission, Planning Board and Conservation Commission. It also is advisable to present this information to the Board of Selectmen, which is the applicant to the Heritage Landscape Inventory program on behalf of the town. Finally distribution of the report to neighborhood associations and any other preservation minded organizations will broaden the audience and assist in gathering interest and support for Ayer's heritage landscapes.

APPENDIX: HERITAGE LANDSCAPES IDENTIFIED BY COMMUNITY

This list was generated by local participants at the Heritage Landscape Identification meeting held in Ayer on April 20, 2006 and the follow-up fieldwork on May 31, 2006. **There are undoubtedly other heritage landscapes that were not identified at the HLI meeting noted above.** The chart has two columns, the names and locations of resources are in the first; notes about resources are in the second. Landscapes are grouped by land use category. Abbreviations used are listed below.

APR = Agricultural Preservation Restriction
CR = Conservation Restriction
LHD = Local Historic District
NR = National Register
PR = Preservation Restriction
* = Priority Landscape
+ = Part of a Priority Landscape

Agriculture	
Ayer State Game Farm Fitchburg Road	State-owned game farm (87 acres), managed by Mass Fisheries and Wildlife. Includes house and agricultural buildings as well as diverse natural habitats. The state no longer raises game here and the use level of the facilities is currently minimal.
Eliades Farm + North Washington Street	80-acre farm owned by Eliades family, includes large barn and farm that raises hay and pumpkins.
North Washington Street Agricultural Area * North Washington Street	Includes fields and two large barns on east side of street associated with the Eliades and Smith farms (see separate listings). Important remnants of Ayer's agricultural past. Hospital across the street is expanding, which puts more development pressure on the remaining farms.
Smith Farm + North Washington Street	Early 19th c. Federal/Greek Revival house and 20th c. dairy barn with roof ventilators are on a separate three-acre parcel. Autumn Ridge Condos have been built on part of the land that belonged to farm. The remainder is under a conservation restriction..
Archaeological	
Native American Artifact Site	Located in northern part of Moore Airfield.
Nonacoicus Plantation	Was original land grant (boundary between Harvard and Ayer). Site of battle in King Philip's War.
Sandy Pond Ice House Foundation Sandy Pond Road	Identified as scenic in 1997 OSRP.
Shaker Village Foundations Snake Hill Road	In Ayer, Harvard and Shirley.

Burial Grounds and Cemeteries	
St. Mary's Cemetery Bishop Road	Catholic.
Woodland Cemetery Harvard Road	Private cemetery, part of which is operated by the Ayer Cemetery Commission.
Civic/Commercial	
Ayer Town Hall + 1 Main Street	NR (in Main Street District), PR. Built 1873 in the High Victorian Gothic style, recently rehabbed, won MHC preservation award. Small park adjacent to town hall which was built by the adjacent 1898 Classical Revival bank received Historic Landscape Preservation Grant.
Ayer Library East Main Street	Important civic building.
County Courthouse East Main Street	Important civic building.
Main Street Area * Main Street	NR (district extends along Main Street from Park to Columbia). The central spine of the community, its economic, social and civic center. Was in National Trust Main Street program.
Page-Moore Block + 33-47 Main Street	NR (in Main Street District). Prominent Italianate style building that is a block long built in 1872, part of Main Street area.
Spaulding Building + 25 Main Street	NR (in Main Street District). Brick Romanesque – 1880.
Commercial	
Art Deco Sign on Liquor Store + Main Street	NR (in Main Street District).
North Middlesex Savings Bank + Main Street	NR (in Main Street District). 1898 Classical Revival bank installed garden between bank and town hall as mitigation for parking area in back. This building once served as a courthouse.
Industrial	
Horgan Ice House West Main Street	Former ice house located near the dam on the Nashua River north of West Main Street. Identified as scenic in 1997 OSRP. Ideal site for canoe launch and park. Presently Grady Research.

Ice House Dam West Main Street	Restored dam now used for hydroelectric power. *Worcester Business Journal* gave this project its 2003 Environmental Award.
Quarry Off Snake Hill Road	Was used by North Family of Harvard Shakers. Located up the hill from Snake Hill Road.
Vicksburg Square	NR (part of Fort Devens District). Now in Devens, new entity formed after Fort Devens was closed.
Institutional	
Federated Church Washington Street	The bell in the tower was made with metal that came from the south during the Civil War. General Benjamin Butler was instrumental in getting it to Massachusetts. At one time the bell was in Fitchburg.
Nashoba Valley Medical Center Ayer/Groton Road	Across from Eliades Farm. Medical Center is currently set back from the road with extensive lawns and fields around it. Major construction is planned.
Old Fire Station 14 Washington St	Built in 1934 – WPA project. About to be vacated. Future status of building is unknown.
Pleasant Street School 62 Pleasant Street	NR (individually listed), PR. Three-story wood frame Colonial Revival building (1894), maintained by the Ayer Historical Commission. Vacant – street wider in front as Mr. Park who gave land said that it had to be wide as he was planning to building houses farther up hill. Housing Authority has application to convert to senior housing. The deal would require a PR on exterior of building and CR on adjacent field.
Sandy Pond School House Sandy Pond Road	Also known as District 11 School. One-room schoolhouse built in 1792. Located at intersection of Sandy Pond, Westford and Willow Roads. Managed by the Sandy Pond School Association. Identified as scenic in 1997 OSRP. Potentially NR eligible.
Verbeck Gate West Main Street	Primary entrance to Devens from Ayer, located on West Main Street near the Nashua River. May generate more traffic as Devens becomes more fully developed.
Natural	
Brown Hill	Located in southeastern part of town.
Drumlin Swarm	Located in Ayer and Groton. Very easy to see on a topographical map.
Petapawag and Squannassit ACECs Along Nashua River	The Petapawag and Squannassit Areas of Critical Environmental Concern share the Nashua River corridor and associated physical, biological and cultural resources and history. Although the two areas were nominated and designated as separate ACECs, the Nashua River corridor is a central resource feature of both ACECs, as well as a central feature of the Central Nashua River Valley ACEC.
Pingree Hill	Southeast corner of town. Undeveloped land identified as scenic in 1997 OSRP.

Open Space/Parks	
Ayer Sportsman's Club Snake Hill Road	Former farm. Large private open space land holding.
Camp Stevens Near Nashua River	Was used as a training ground during the Civil War. Site is marked with a stone monument. Privately owned.
Perone Park School Street	Located on Grove Pond, formerly known as Nutting Grove Park. Also known as Grove Park. Important to East Main Street neighborhood.
Pine Meadow Conservation Land	Also known as Erskine Property, 129.19 forested acres used for hiking, picnicking and horseback riding.
Snake Hill Area	From state game farm to Snake Hill, area identified in 1982 landscape inventory, now part of ACEC.
Residential	
Devenscrest	Former military housing. Will be only wooden structures left from Devens.
19th Century House Park Street	Opposite Dunkin Donuts. Vacant house, partially burned.
Park House 25 Park Street	Now part of NAPA Auto parts. The oldest house in town.
Perone Park Neighborhood	Located south of East Main Street. Park and Grove Pond are focal points for the neighborhood.
Pleasant Street/ Washington Street Neighborhood *	Area around Pleasant Street School. Also includes lower Washington Street. 19th and early 20th century dwellings ranging from commodious to modest in scale and elaboration.
Sandy Pond Cottages	Small cottages around pond. In the early 20th century Ayer residents took the street car out to their summer cottages – along Central Avenue, hence the extra width of that road.
West Main Street Area *	Especially Greek Revival houses and St. Mary's Catholic Church.
Transportation	
B & M Railroad	
Frederick Carlton Circle *	Also known as the rotary. Identified as scenic in 1997 OSRP. Changes are proposed.

Groton/Harvard Road	Identified as scenic in 1997 OSRP.
Littleton Road	Has handsome stone walls.
MacPherson Road *	Very scenic. Upgrade of road is proposed.
Nashua River Rail Trail	Abandoned Worcester-Nashua Railroad from Ayer through Groton, Pepperell and Dunstable to NH.
Railroad Bridge West Main Street	There is great view of Wachusett Mountain from bridge.
Railroad Station and Artifacts * Mechanic Street & Shirley St.	Station is important to community economy and vitality. Proposal to relocate station to Devens would heavily impact Ayer. Artifacts include Bridge Trestle (across Main St), Interlocking Tower (on tracks behind Main St, Turntable (Shirley and Mechanic Sts.). Identified as scenic in 1997 OSRP.
Sandas Point Road	Gorgeous road on Spectacle Pond. Hard to get to (have to go through industrial park).
Snake Hill Road	
Waterbodies	
Bennet's Brook	
Erskine Pond	
Fletcher Pond	Central Avenue, connected to Sandy Pond by causeway.
Grove Pond	Identified as scenic in 1997 OSRP.
Long Pond	Mostly in Ayer, a small part is in Groton.
Nashua River	Including Oxbow.
Nonaicocus Brook	Main waterway for all of Ayer's water bodies to flow to the Nashua River.
Plow Shop Pond	
Sandy Pond	Identified as scenic in 1997 OSRP.
Shaker Mill Pond	Identified as scenic in 1997 OSRP.
Spectacle Pond	90% in Littleton and 10% is in Ayer. Eastern end of town.