



Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation

Heritage Landscape Inventory Program

Middleborough Reconnaissance Report

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by
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MASSACHUSETTS HERITAGE LANDSCAPE INVENTORY MIDDLEBOROUGH RECONNAISSANCE REPORT

PLANNING ISSUES

Need. Middleborough, through its Town Manager of fifteen years and Town Planner of twelve years, has accomplished a long list of projects that lead to preservation of the community's rural character. The most significant missing piece is documentation of important landscapes. The Town is the second largest town in Massachusetts and has the largest land area in the fastest growing region of the Commonwealth. The increase in population in the last decade was double the rate across the State. Rt. I-495 cuts diagonally through the southern half of the town and has two interchanges. Also there is the Middleborough-Lakeville MBTA station that has improved accessibility to Middleborough. These factors contribute to the loss of unprotected and significant landscapes, thus a change in community character.

Resources and Documentation. The Middleborough Master Plan in draft form, dated March 2001, contains a thorough section on Findings and Alternatives that is relevant to landscape identification. The goals and objectives for Land Use and for Natural, Cultural/Historic and Recreational Resources identify the agricultural landscape, the villages, the natural and cultural resources that form "Middleborough's unique character and image." The Open Space and Recreation Plan of 1998 substantiates and expands the information included in the Findings section of the draft Master Plan. The Historical Commission developed the Historic Preservation Plan in 1989 and passed a Demolition Delay By-Law in 2000. Recently the Conservation Commission established a Land-Use Management Subcommittee to develop strategies for the preservation of town-owned land.

MHC historic resource documentation includes 840 resources recorded on over 500 survey forms of which 15 are area forms for the many villages that make up Middleborough. Most were completed in the mid-1980s. National Register of Historic Places listings include five individual properties of which one is an archaeological site, one small district containing six resources at the Middleborough Waterworks, the Muttock/Oliver Mill District which is a collection of archaeological resources, and one large Middleborough Center Historic District, listed just over one year ago, with 495 resources of which only 45 are non-contributing. The files contain two MHC staff Eligibility Opinions; one for the well-known Oliver Mills, the other for a small former tourist cabin court. Both are considered eligible. The MHC Middleborough Reconnaissance Survey Report of 1981 and the 1985 Narrative History accompanying the Historic Resource Survey completed at that time establish the basis for the local historic context. Two properties are protected by preservation restrictions. The Middleborough Town Hall was the recipient of a Massachusetts Preservation Projects Fund grant in 1998, thus had a PR applied following the work. The other property is the Savings Bank Building. Both properties now are included in the Center National Register District.

A prehistory inventory was conducted in 1991. The result was an extensive report of known and predicted pre-historic sites with the determination that Middleborough was a central location throughout 10,000 years of New England pre-history. This same report includes recommendations on how to protect these non-renewable resources.

Planning Issues. Planning issues and preservation of community character in a rapidly growing climate are the focus of Middleborough's town officials. Initiatives have been taken by the Planning Board, the Conservation Commission, and the Historical Commission to address the protection of open land, agricultural endeavors, the water sources that are rich with unique archaeological resources and several

important historic industrial sites. The Planning Board also is seeking ways to reinforce and preserve the village identities throughout Middleborough.

Planning and land use issues fall into five categories: water bodies, agricultural landscapes, villages, roads and the downtown area. Planning for specific types of landscapes such as town commons, cemeteries, and industrial landscapes tend to fall into one of more of the broader categories noted above.

Water bodies include rivers and a pond complex – the largest natural pond/lake system in the Commonwealth. Planning issues include accessibility, viewsheds, and protection of pre-historic sites.

Agricultural landscapes which are a dominant part of the community character include working farms, dairy, truck gardens and cranberry bogs as well as open space that no longer is used. The viability of these farms and the protection of much of the landscape of former farms is a significant issue for the protection of the community's character. Land use planning as well as financial programs are high on the list of preservation technology for this type of resource.

The villages of Middleborough are a key feature of the community character with a concentration of historic resources. The planning issues for these concentrated centers are traffic impact particularly related to potential road widening, residential development gobbling up the abutting farmland at the edges of these districts, and the reuse of key institutional buildings.

SITE VISIT REPORT

The meeting was attended by the Town Manager and the Chair of the Historical Commission as well as PAL team members. The purpose was to review the preliminary list of potential heritage landscapes compiled by the town and to conduct a windshield survey. Middleborough's approach was to identify general categories of resources: water bodies, agricultural areas, village centers, downtown areas and scenic roads, and then to identify significant resources within those categories.

Water Bodies

Nemasket River. The Nemasket River corridor is a central feature within the community. It has known historic resources and possible prehistoric resources, as well as scenic and recreational potential. The town listed three specific areas along the river as being particularly noteworthy: Vaughan Street Bridge, Murdock Street Bridge and Oliver Mill Park. Management issues are to make the river more visible and accessible to the public and to highlight its cultural values as well as its natural resource and recreational values. The park near the DPW yard is an excellent model for this.

Taunton River. The Taunton River, which has been designated a Wild and Scenic River, forms the northern boundary of Middleborough. Raynham and Bridgewater lie to the north. The Taunton River does not appear to be very visible in Middleborough but is probably more so in other communities. There are four bridge crossings in town but limited access.

Assawompsett Pond Complex. This area, which encompasses Assawompsett, Great Quittacus and Pocksha Ponds is a major grouping of water resources that forms the boundary between Lakeville and Middleborough. Access and viewpoints are limited in Middleborough. Much of the land abutting the ponds is owned by the City of New Bedford for watershed purposes.

Agricultural Area

Thompson Street Agricultural Area. Middleborough is unusual among southern Massachusetts towns for the extent and diversity of its active agriculture. There are three major agricultural areas in town, of which the Thompson Street area has the highest integrity. Types of agriculture are mixed, with limited remaining dairy, some truck farming and nursery plants, and also some cranberry bogs. There is a strong agricultural infrastructure (4H Club etc.) at Thompson Street. Most of the land is owned by old agricultural families, with some new infill housing. This area is not perceived as highly threatened now but may be in future. A large portion of the Thompson Street area is in 61A.

Villages

The Green. This was the original town center, used as militia green during colonial times. It has a high level of integrity and is clearly identifiable as an area but is totally unprotected. Efforts to establish an NR district have been met with opposition. The area is threatened by potential widening of Route 44. The biggest management issues are related to the common, which has been split by modern traffic and encroached on by front yards. Features include: the green; barn associated with former tavern (tavern is gone); First Congregational Church; a small well-preserved cemetery, and the Green School (a one room schoolhouse).

Titicut Village. This is a very cohesive village center in the northern portion of town with a high level of integrity. The town is interested in establishing a local historic district. Immediate green area is not threatened but larger area is -- by residential development. Features include: Pratt Free School; Titicut

Parish Green (triangular with horse trough, flag pole, monument); two churches, a cemetery with diverse monuments; well preserved 18th/19th century homes; and dry laid stone walls.

Rock Village. This area in the southern portion of Middleborough is a former village/resort area with small cottage type homes and some larger Victorian ones. Rock Pond is the focal point although it is not very visible from the road. There are some public buildings as well. It might have potential as a NR and/or local historic district. Features include: cottages and Victorian houses, Drew homestead, Rock School (now Christ Evangelical Church), Rock Village church, and several farms with associated farm buildings.

South Middleborough. This late 19th/early 20th century commercial/municipal district was an early 1930s strip on the main Cape road. Features include: United Methodist Church (vinyl siding); 19th century cemetery with approximately 200 monuments; Grange Hall; fire station (3 bay, lower story is boulder - WPA era); two room school owned by town (in poor condition); Sisson Diner (1930s, still open); Williams Trading Post and Lucy Braley Candy shop. This area is threatened by neglect and changing land use, one house has been lost already. The town considers it as a potential NR district.

The following areas are less strong than those above, and are not as obviously perceived as historic town centers. They are totally unprotected, in part because they are not seen as distinct places.

Eddyville. Small rural center. Cluster of homes around small triangle of land with monument. Less obvious and evocative than 7 and 8 above. Marked with sign – a potential model for other village centers. See MHC form already completed.

Warrentown. Less apparent as village center, hard to read because it doesn't have a green (mill, historic homes, association with Tom Thumb). Didn't visit.

Muttock. Hard to read on the ground but listed on NR in part because of association with Oliver Mill.

Downtown

Everett Square. This area was hard to read on a quick drive through. Key spaces have been destroyed (gas station etc). One NR mill building might serve as an anchor for a potential district. Area is considered the stepchild of revitalization, it is an important entrance point to downtown but buildings are neglected. It might have potential as a district but not necessarily a landscape.

South Main Street. This area extends south from downtown. It is mostly large lot residential, tree-lined and appears as a cohesive neighborhood at an important entrance to town. It is a potential NR district and/or scenic road. Check boundaries of current downtown historic district. Other portions of Main Street were not visited.

Roads

Marion Road. There are seven designated scenic roads in town and the town considers the designation to offer some protection. Marion Road is typical. Features include: rural land uses with few curb cuts, lots of animals (horses, sheep etc); stone walls (many dry laid and of unusually high quality construction); fire lanes adjacent to road; cemetery at north end of road; several nursing homes; largely wooded on either side of road with some open fields. A big issue is destruction of stone walls.

Other Resources Discussed

Several other types of resources were discussed briefly.

Fall Brook Furnace was identified as a significant and potentially threatened structure but does not fall into the category of heritage landscape. There was also reluctance to publicize its existence.

Cemeteries, although not identified as a category of resource, are included in many of the village areas. Middleborough does not have a municipal cemetery but rather relies on a number of village cemeteries and those associated with specific religious groups and some older family cemeteries. Although there is a lack of perpetual care funds, the Cemetery Committee is considered to be doing a good job and is currently cataloging gravestones and working on preservation issues.

Parks as a group of resources were not discussed at all, possibly because they are not considered threatened and possibly because there are few older parks.

Commons were generally included within village centers.

The *Master List of Projects of the Olmsted Firm in Massachusetts* does not indicate any Olmsted firm projects in Middleborough.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Preliminary List of Sites Recommended For Intensive Study

The following sites are recommended for intensive study:

- Nemasket River Corridor (with Lakeville)
- Thompson Street Agricultural Area – need to define boundaries
- The Green
- South Middleborough Village Center
- Assawompsett Pond Complex (mostly in Lakeville)

This recommendation is based on the site visits and discussion amongst the consultants.

2. National Register and Local Historic District

Although the Town is well informed about the processes and benefits of National Register and Local Historic District designation it is important to here reiterate some locations that would be well suited for preservation efforts. Although it is known that the church at The Green has been opposed to National Register listing as well as Local Historic District designation it may be appropriate to continue to talk about such efforts as well as the benefits (eligibility for MPPF) of such designations to the Church and to the Town for eligibility for the MHC MPPF and DEM Historic Landscape Preservation grants programs. Titicut and South Middleborough also are good candidates for both types of districts, bearing in mind that for areas in which most of the property owners are private rather than public or non-profit, the Local Historic District designation would provide greater and more appropriate protection against loss of historic fabric at these village centers.

9/3/01