



Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation

Heritage Landscape Inventory Program

Rochester

Reconnaissance Report

Prepared for
The Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation
by
Public Archaeology Lab, Inc.
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MASSACHUSETTS HERITAGE LANDSCAPE INVENTORY ROCHESTER RECONNAISSANCE REPORT

PLANNING ISSUES

Need. The figures generated for Rochester's build-out potential are somewhat alarming in large part due to the vast areas of unprotected open land. A full build-out would generate an additional 8,500 dwelling units eating up much of the over 15,000 acres of potentially developable land in the Town. The proximity of Rt I-195 and I-495 as well as the near future MBTA expansion combined with the regions status as the fastest growing area in Massachusetts sets the stage for loss of important heritage landscapes.

Resources and Documentation. Rochester's 1996 Open Space Plan will be updated in the near future. A Master Plan Committee recently has completed an update to the 1979 Master Plan. The historic resource inventory includes documentation of 148 individual resources, 14 areas in which there are at least 70 resources mentioned. Most of the survey work was completed in the 1998 as part of a Survey and Planning Grant. Updating and new survey forms were completed for many of the properties in the 1999 designation of the Rochester Center Historic District, a local historic district adopted consistent with M.G.L. Chapter 40-C. There are no properties that have been listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The MHC Rochester Reconnaissance Survey Report of 1981 and the 1999 Local Historic District Study Report establish the basis for the local historic context.

Planning Issues. Planning issues and protection of community character in Rochester presently are focused on the future of a couple of large, scenic and historically significant farms. Agricultural landscapes are a dominant part of the community character. Possibly the recently passed flexible development by-law may assist the Planning Board in protecting that character if large parcels have to be developed. Agricultural land use planning as well as financial programs are high on the list of preservation technology for this type of resource.

SITE VISIT REPORT – August 7, 2001

The meeting was attended by the Local Project Coordinator, members of the Historical Commission, Historic District Commission and Historical Society, as well as PAL team members. The purpose was to review the list of potential heritage landscapes prepared by the town and to conduct a windshield survey. The preliminary list of landscapes was compiled by the Local Project Coordinator and members of the Historical Commission and the Historic District Commission. The sites listed below are more or less in priority order.

Eastover Farm. This extensive well maintained farm with several 19th century houses, numerous barns and outbuildings, beautifully crafted stone walls, and extensive fields is located near the center of town and functions as a vital part of the community with its farmstand, hayrides, berry picking, and visual prominence. It has been taken for granted as a cornerstone of the community for many years, in part because it is so prosperous looking. However, recent reports of significant difficulties due to the current negative trend of the cranberry business have changed complacency to serious anxiety about the future of this property. This is the town's number one priority for open space and historic preservation. Extensive work has been done to document the property and to find a viable preservation solution for its future. The Trustees of Reservation have been working with the owner. The property is not in 61A and the owners are not interested in listing the property on the National Register even though it is eligible.

Town Center. Rochester is fortunate to be one of the few remaining Massachusetts communities where the town center still evokes its 18th and 19th century past. Yet the current status of the town center is fragile, particularly with regard to the open land that functions as a de facto town common. Much of it is privately owned and is highly vulnerable to change, even though it is located within the historic district. While there has been extensive survey work done in recent years, it has not focused on the landscape of the town center, which is literally the heart and soul of the community, the site of celebrations, fairs and other events that bring the town together. This area was not initially on the town's list of sites but was unanimously added after the site visit.

Vaughn Hill Agricultural Area. Rochester is fortunate to have several working farms and a number of open fields that still appear as farms. The largest (and only remaining dairy farm in town) is the Cervelli Farm which is under an APR. The large gambrel Cervelli dairy barn is a prominent visual landmark in town that is featured on the cover of the town's Open Space Plan. The Cervelli's also operate a farmstand. Several smaller farms in the area, including the Fearing farm with shingled cape and barn as well as farm pond are clustered near the Cervelli farm, creating a distinct agricultural district. Slightly further away on Rounesville Road is the Lionberger barn, another well known landmark within the community.

Hartley Pond And Mill Site. This highly visible site includes a pond, mill foundation with wheel timbers over sluiceway, former hardware store (19th cent?) and late 20th century memorial park. It is a fragile archeological site in a highly visible location. It is privately owned and because the site is potentially hazardous, demolition of the ruins is a threat.

Cowen's Corner. Cowen's Corner is one of the small crossroads that mark the community. It is now – characterized by older homes and open fields. The owner of much of the land in this area has recently died and there is likelihood of change in the near future. This site was not included on the town's initial list but was added after the site visit.

Snipatuit Causeway. This earthen causeway provides access across Snipatuit Pond for the two-lane Neck Road. It is a scenic area with long distance views across the pond and a favorite fishing spot. There has always been informal public access but one owner has recently put up a tall stockade fence which not

only blocks access but also views. Another potential threat is road widening which would alter the character of this unusual area.

Cemeteries. Two cemeteries (Hillside and Old Parish) were included in the town's list but it was discovered that they had recently been surveyed. The most serious threat is at lesser known cemeteries such as Old Parish which is largely wooded and highly vulnerable to neglect and potential damage by falling trees. The owner of the Old Parish Cemetery is uncertain. Some cleanup work has been done by volunteers.

Olaussen's Tree Farm. This is a 70-100-acre former dairy farm with modest ca. 1920s gambrel roof house and outbuildings, now used primarily as a tree farm. It is in a state of transition and the Rochester Land Trust has been working with the owner. A wide power line easement cuts through the property.

Stillwater (Bisbee's Corner). This area in the northern section of town was the site of an iron mill (19th century?). The area is overgrown and difficult to visit during summer months. Bisbee's Corner, a four way intersection just south of the mill site has three historic dwellings on seemingly modest lots.

Witch's Rock. This large rock (glacial erratic?) well over six feet in height is located in the front yard of a residence. Presently the rock is covered with a vine. It has many legends associated with it. There appears to be no immediate threat, although a witch has been painted on the rock.

Church's Mill Site/Church's Falls. Hidden but picturesque site. Not visited because access is difficult in summer.

Other Resources Discussed

Town Pound. Tall stone enclosure on Snipatuit Road is a rare surviving example of a town pound. Survey form has been completed (#901).

New Bedford Water Works. Imposing late 19th century building and extensive surrounding acreage. Buildings have been documented.

Several additional farms and the Rounesville mill site were also discussed but not in detail.

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

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Preliminary List of Sites Recommended For Further Study

The following sites are recommended for intensive study:

- Town Center Landscape
- Vaughn Hill Agricultural Area
- Cowen's Corner
- Snipatuit Causeway
- Hartley Mill Site

This recommendation is based on site visits and discussion with Rochester's Conservation Agent and several members of the Historical Commission.

2. National Register Nominations

National Register listing may assist in raising awareness and interest in some of the community's heritage landscapes, particularly a couple of the mill sites that retain artifacts. The Center district clearly is eligible for listing and may assist the community in possible road widening issues that could change the nature of the perceived common (owned by the Church).

3. Cemetery Documentation and Maintenance

There are several small burial grounds scattered throughout Rochester, many owned by the Town. Each has its own level of repair and maintenance needs. An overall plan of burial ground preservation would help to guide the future of these rich sites. Guidance in how to care for those properties may be obtained by joining with neighboring communities facing similar issues to engage a burial ground consultant to conduct a training workshop on preservation of burial grounds. The DEM Historic Cemeteries Initiative book also contains useful information.