



Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation

Heritage Landscape Inventory Program

West Bridgewater Reconnaissance Report

Prepared for
The Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation
by
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MASSACHUSETTS HERITAGE LANDSCAPE INVENTORY WEST BRIDGEWATER RECONNAISSANCE REPORT

PLANNING ISSUES

Need. The West Bridgewater Letter of Interest for the Heritage Landscape Inventory Program specifically states the need to document heritage landscapes with the imposing development issues of commuter rail stations in two adjacent towns, close proximity to Route 24, the EOEA build-out showing a 175% increase in the community's population, and the fact that there are 12,000 acres of privately owned farmland in the Town.

Resources and Documentation. The Town is well organized with an Open Space Committee, a recently re-organized Historical Commission, a pro-active and energetic Forestry & Parks Department, a Park Restoration Committee for one of the community's gems, War Memorial Park, and a Beautification Fund. Historic resource documentation includes 56 survey forms most written by the early 1980s with the exception of the recently completed detailed inventory form for War Memorial Park. No properties are listed on the National Register of Historic Places to date. The MHC West Bridgewater Reconnaissance Survey Report of 1981 establishes the basis for the local historic context. The Open Space and Recreation Plan Update was completed in 1999. Currently the Town is developing a Master Plan and has a Section titled "Historical and Cultural Resources", which also establishes an historical context and timeline of West Bridgewater's development, identifies historic resources, articulates potential goals and policies that may affect those resources and provides recommendations. The list of recommendations are worthy of serious consideration by the Historical Commission and the Town, including formalizing Historical Commission review of many land use proposals, adopting a demolition delay by-law and a scenic roads by-law, and encouraging educational and collaborative efforts to promote the significance of the heritage resources.

Planning Issues. West Bridgewater's planning issues and protection of community character fall into three categories: stewardship of town-owned property such as parks and cemeteries; preservation of farmsteads and accompanying agricultural landscapes; and preservation of historic mill and industrial sites that articulate the developmental history of West Bridgewater.

Stewardship of town-owned resources relies on budgeting time and money into the Town's overall plan to properly care for these resources. This challenge is particularly apparent with the large task of maintaining War Memorial Park, a most significant resource. As in all communities, the maintenance of burial grounds also needs funds that often are not available.

Agricultural landscapes are highly significant resources that articulate the community's identity. West Bridgewater's largest agricultural landscape continues as a working farm (contiguous farms) with many historic resources providing scenic views as well as important information about agriculture in the Town. Other smaller farms are in varying states of use and all are subject to rising costs of farming as well as the enormous increase in land values if sold to developers. Land use planning as well as financial programs are high on the list of preservation technology for this resource.

Mill sites, dams and other industrial related artifacts are threatened by locations on private property or at important cross roads. Maintenance and restoration of canal and sluiceway walls and mill foundations is costly, a burden that would not be undertaken by a private property owner unless there are remaining buildings that are useable. Overgrowth making areas inaccessible and invisible as well as lack of information makes neglect the threat to such sites.

SITE VISIT REPORT

The meeting was attended by the Local Project Coordinator and members of the Historical Commission and Historical Society, as well as PAL team members. The purpose of the meeting was to review the list of potential heritage landscapes compiled by the town and to conduct a windshield survey. Members of the Open Space Committee, Historical Society, Forestry Department, and newly re-established Historical Commission had previously met to prepare the list.

War Memorial Park. This 5 1/2-acre site has an early industrial history and since the 1930s has been a town park, designed and constructed by the WPA. It incorporates many features that are important to the town, including the Arch Street Bridge and associated sluiceways, a miniature mill, a miniature covered bridge, and various monuments. It is the town's most valued heritage landscape. It was recently included in the DEM Town Commons Program, which provided an MHC survey form and general planning recommendations. The park is considered eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

Anderson Farm. The Anderson Farm located along River Street in the southern section of town includes about 12 acres of land owned by the Anderson, Metcalf and Howard families. It is the last active farm in town (primarily corn) and is also highly visible. Buildings include the Keith house, a historic house owned by the Historical Society (see 1980 MHC survey form); the Anderson residence; and various barns and outbuildings.

Porter Mill Pond and Dam. This area on Crescent Street is the site of an old dam and millpond with an adjacent small building now used as a residence. Although currently overgrown, it is a potentially scenic area that borders on conservation land.

South Street Cemetery. This circa 1663 cemetery, also known as the old graveyard, is the oldest burial ground in town and contains about 300 stones. It is the burial place of many of the town's founding families and 20 Revolutionary War veterans. A two-page MHC survey form was prepared in 1982. The West Bridgewater Forestry Department provides routine maintenance. The Historical Commission is interested in inventorying gravestones and learning more about burial ground preservation in general.

Matfield Street Cemetery. This circa 1747 cemetery, also known as Powder House Cemetery, is the second oldest burial ground in town and contains about 100 stones. It was at one time the site of the town's powder magazine. A two-page MHC survey form was prepared in 1982. The West Bridgewater Forestry Department provides routine maintenance. Wall along the front appears to be in poor condition.

Leonard Farm. This field and early 19th century house are a remnant of open space in an urbanizing part of town.

Skim Milk Bridge/Indian Mound. This area is located along the Town River in the southern part of town near the Hockomock Swamp. It includes Solitude Rock, Skim Milk Bridge, Pete Cook's Place II, and reportedly an Indian mound. The site is difficult to reach this time of year so it was not visited but it is considered an important place in town.

Brick Kiln. This site, located on Ash Street, south of Reynolds Boat ramp, dates to at least 1725, possibly earlier. The site is difficult to reach this time of year so it was not visited.

Howard Street Mill. This early industrial site, located along the Cochessett River near Walnut and Manly Streets, includes remnants of old mills and canals. The site is difficult to reach this time of year so it was not visited.

Other Resources Discussed

The following properties might also be considered as potential heritage landscapes but were not considered among the top ten candidates.

Hockomock Swamp – Large area in southwestern section of town that is an Area of Critical Environmental Concern. Not included in town's list as it is considered primarily a natural area and is mostly publicly owned (extends into Easton and Bridgewater too).

Cemeteries– In addition to the two listed above, the following are listed in the town's master plan:

West Center Street, near Route 24

Pine Hill, on North Main near Matfield

Jerusalem Graveyard, on Manley Street

Dunbar Family Cemetery, on Walnut street

Town River – Wanders through the southern portion of town.

Central Square – This space with the town's Soldiers Monument located on it lies at the intersection of Center Street and Main Street in the center of the community but is perceived as mostly a traffic rotary. Although it is not considered a town common, it has potential to be a more visible focal point of the town.

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

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Preliminary List of Sites Recommended For Further Study

The following sites are recommended for intensive study:

- Anderson Farm (if owner consents)
- Porter Mill Pond and Dam (if owner consents)
- South Street Cemetery
- Matfield Street Cemetery
- Skim Milk Bridge Area or possibly Town River as a whole.

This recommendation is based on site visits and discussion with West Bridgewater representatives of the Historical Society, the Historical Commission and the Director of Forestry and Parks.

2. Funding for War Memorial Park and the Arch Street Bridge

The War Memorial Park is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places and the expanded inventory form that was prepared as part of the DEM Town Commons program can serve as the basis for the nomination. Preparation of the nomination would be an important first step. Listing in the National Register carries with it automatic listing in the State Register of Historic Places, which can make the property eligible for various grant programs for its public ownership.

If the Town is successful in its application to DEM for a Historic Landscapes Preservation Grant to develop a preservation plan for the park, it may also consider applying for a Massachusetts Preservation Projects Fund (MPPF) grant to begin the work of the preservation plan and to alternate between funding programs for a phased work program. The match would have to come from another non-State program source for each of these two – the MHC and the DEM – grant programs. This Park is an excellent local resource and the preservation and on-going maintenance should be a priority for its importance in defining the community character by informing visitors about the eighteenth and early nineteenth century industrial history of West Bridgewater while providing a scenic location for passive recreation.

3. Cemetery Documentation and Maintenance

The Town is responsible for six cemeteries and requests guidance in how to care for those properties. Such guidance 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.