

MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report

ROYALSTON

Report Date: 1984

Associated Regional Report: Central 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.

The activity that is the subject of the MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report has been financed in part with Federal funds from the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. However, the contents and opinions do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of the Interior. This program receives Federal financial assistance for identification and protection of historic properties. Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Age Discrimination Act of 1975, as amended, the U.S. Department of the Interior prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, disability or age in its federally assisted programs. If you believe you have been discriminated against in any program, activity or facility as described above, or if you desire further information please write to: Office of Equal Opportunity, National Park Service, 1849 C Street, N.W., Washington, D.C., 20240.



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MHC RECONNAISSANCE SURVEY REPORT

DRAFT

DATE: 1984

COMMUNITY: Royalston

I. TOPOGRAPHY

II. POLITICAL BOUNDARIES

"Royalshire" grant established in 1752 is made town of Royalston in 1765. Eastern "Royalston Leg" is anne ed to Winchendon in 1780. Southwest territory is included in new district of Orange in 1783. Part of Athol and Gerry (Phillipston) are annexed in the southeast in 1799, and part of the Millers River corridor in Athol is annexed in 1803.

III. HISTORIC OVERVIEW

Royalston is a residential community in the highlands north of the Millers River along the Tully River and Lawrence Brook tributaries. Native sites are possible at Long Pond, Doane Falls, and at the Millers River falls in the southeast. Permanent European settlement is delayed to ca. 1762 by native hostilities, with the meetinghouse site established by 1764. Dispersed 18th- and early 19th-century agricultural settlement spreads out from Lawrence Brook and Tully River meadowlands. An early 19th-century civic/commercial focus develops at Royalston Center, while a small mill and manufacturing complex grows at Doane Falls. Textile manufacturing, initiated in 1813, persisted at South Royalston in the southeast through the 19th and early 20th centuries. Agricultural abandonment in the 19th century was ultimately followed by the loss of the South Royalston industrial base in the mid 20th century. Some modern suburban growth has extended into the southern part of town from Athol, and pressures for exurban development, particularly on hilltop sites with good views, is likely to intensify. Some agricultural landscapes survive, as do a number of representative late 18- and early 19th-century farmhouses. Royalston Center survives as a good regional example of an early 19th-century commercial/civic focus. Although the mills have been lost, South Royalston retains intact virtually all other elements of a textile manufacturing village, including a notable assortment of 19th- and early 20th-century worker housing.

IV. CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620)

A. Transportation Routes

Highland tributary area on the East Branch Tully River corridor. North/south trail from Pequog west of Tully River inferred as Athol-Richmond Road. Alternative trail north from Pequog inferred as Athol Road past Doane Falls, with branches northeast (northeast Fitzwilliam Road) and east (Winchendon Road). Branch southeast to South Royalston Falls conjectured as New Boston Road-Neal Road-River Road.

B. Settlement Pattern

Archaeological and documentary evidence on the area for this period is very scarce. The only known site is an undescribed cemetery. Density of population is presumed to be low in predominant uplands, but the shores of Millers River in the south and Tully River and Long Pond running north-south on the west are likely occupation sites.

C. Subsistence Pattern

Small family and task groups visited the area seasonally for resource exploitation, primarily through hunting and fishing.

V. PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675)

A. Transportation Routes

Established trails continued in use.

B. Settlement Pattern

The near absence of settler contact in this area between the two major areas of both native and colonial settlement. The epidemic of the 1630s from the Connecticut Valley to the east probably reduced population in the area, but the general pattern persisted.

C. Subsistence Pattern

Established patterns continued as contact with colonials remained secondary.

VI. COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

A. Transportation Routes

Early roads included the east/west route from Ipswich Canada (Winchendon) through Royalston Center (Winchendon Road-South Royalston Road-Warwick Road), the road north from Pequog (Athol) past the Doane Falls mills and through the Center (Athol Road-Bolton Road-Athol Road-Main Street-Frye Hill Road-Prospect Hill Road), the road north from Athol to Keene, New Hampshire (Athol-Richmond Road), and the road southeast from the Center to Baptist Common, Templeton (Town Dump Road-Stockwell Road-abandoned route to South Royalston Road-Dickey Road-South Royalston Road. Other local roads radiated from the meetinghouse center to outlying farms.

B. Population

Frontier warfare prevented settlement in this area through most of the period. Joseph Priest's halfway house represented the first colonial settlement in the town, but the date and term of the site is unknown. Six permanent settlers came to the town in 1762. The town was incorporated three years later, but had not the required 60 resident families. The church was formed in 1766 by 12 men and

three women. When the first minister was settled in 1767 there were 42 or 43 families in the town. In 1776 the total population equalled 617. A large proportion of the settlers moved to the town from the southern Worcester County town of Sutton, about 20 families, as well as other eastern and southern county towns. An additional 12 families came from the southeastern Massachusetts town of Rehoboth, as well as other eastern towns. Both of these towns were sites of early Baptist churches, so it is not surprising that ten families of that denomination were in the town from earliest settlement. The group met from 1767 and spent a year in wait for their minister from the Thompson, Connecticut church, where many had been members, forming a church in 1768, with six men and two women.

C. Settlement Pattern

Located in the most northwesterly section of the county, the town was the last area to be opened for settlement. Small portions in the northeast had been granted to individuals for service to the colony: the largest, ca. 1,200 acres, was known as the Pierpont grant; 300 acres were given to Joseph Priest for maintaining a halfway house on the road north from Worcester. Two hundred acres was granted to Thomas Hapgood in 1742 for service in an Indian war; and 600 acres were awarded to Benomi Moore et al. in 1737 for burying the bleached bones of ambushed soldiers, but was transferred later to Samuel Hunt et al. of Northfield. In 1752 the Province auctioned the remainder of its lands in this area, north of Pequog or Athol to the Province line, including Royalston Leg, to a group of nine prominent Boston area investors that included Isaac Royal and James Otis. Shortly thereafter, these proprietors divided the land into 100-acre lots for 60 settlers, but it appears that actual occupied farms were smaller; the proprietors also received lots of unknown size in the town. Settlement was postponed by frontier warfare, so that the meetinghouse location was not selected until 1762, when ten acres were set aside for it, the burying ground, and the training field. This lot was located near the town's center. The Baptists located their meeting in the west, in an unknown spot near Long Pond and Tully River, at the period's end. The settlers made their homes on dispersed farms.

D. Economic Base

Although the town is not reported in the 1771 Valuation, its location and date of founding contribute to the Poor Agrarian rating common to the northern and western towns. These towns rank low on commerce, community wealth, agrarian prosperity, and propertylessness, moderate on corn production, and high on agrarian poverty. The town attempted to build mills unsuccessfully prior to the establishment of a grist mill on Lawrence Stream ca. 1775 by Isaac Gale of Sutton. The town also processed potash from 1760.

E. Architecture

Residential: Little evidence of many period dwellings. Two survivals: a two-story, five-bay, double chimney plan (1768) and one from 1762 with later additions.

Institutional: First meetinghouse constructed in 1764.

VII. FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

A. Transportation Routes

Colonial roads continued in use. The Worcester-Fitzwilliam Turnpike (chartered 1805) was opened across the northeast part of town (Old Turnpike Road) and extended only as far south as Baldwin's Mills (Baldwinsville) by ca. 1815. In the 1790s, the New Boston Road is opened to the southeast from the Center (South Royalston Road-Toney Road-New Boston Road), with connecting roads to the Winchendon Road (New Boston Road) and the South Royalston Road (South Royalston Road).

B. Population

The town experienced its greatest growth between 1776 and 1790 when the total nearly doubled, from 617 to 1,130. Although this pace slowed, the final figure for the period reached 1,493 in 1830. The town sustained this growth in spite of a dysentery epidemic during which 40 died in 1777, a throat distemper epidemic during which 66 died in 1795, as well as the formation of Orange in 1810. Throughout this period the Church of Christ remained stable under two long ministries, suffering none of the schisms that characterize the period, and remaining Trinitarian throughout its history. More upheaval plagued the Baptists of the town, whose minister took an unpopular pro-government stance during Shays' Rebellion, causing division. Soon after, a group of 22 were dismissed to form a church in Warwick, but the groups were reunited in 1802. A group called the Free Donation Society was formed by residents of the west in response to required ministerial taxation, but died out when this was outlawed in the 1830s. In 1826/27 an itinerant from the Methodist circuit based in Winchendon and Ashburnham began visiting South Royalston, meeting antagonism from Congregationalists. The town established its Federalist stance by speaking out loudly against the Embargo of 1807.

The town early established a subscription Library Company in 1778; changing its name later to Social Library, it remained in operation until 1849. A second library was established in 1817. Townsmen became members of Athol's Harris Lodge of Masons after 1802. Women formed a Ladies' Benevolent Society in 1824.

C. Settlement Pattern

Dispersed agricultural settlement continued. The second meetinghouse was built in 1797, and a small residential and commercial center develops along Main Street in the early 19th

century. Dispersed milling activity located primarily along Lawrence Brook, most notably at Doane Falls south of Royalston Center. The most significant industrial development occurred at South Royalston on the Millers River corridor, where textile mills were active after 1813. To the west of the Center, the first Baptist Church (ca. 1779-1783) was located northwest of Long Pond. The second Baptist Church (1805) was relocated to the western highland near the Warwick line.

D. Economic Base

E. Architecture

Residential: Single-story, center chimney, five-bay plans; two-story, five-bay, double chimney plans; and two-story, five-bay, rearwall chimney plans appear to have been the predominant house forms based on survivals. One early gable end, five-bay, single-story house (1820) was noted.

Institutional: Second meetinghouse with cupola erected in 1797. Baptists built a meetinghouse (approximately 36 x 40 feet) between 1779 and 1783 near Long Pond on the Tully River. This was replaced ca. 1804 with a meetinghouse (40 x 60 feet) on the "Baptist Common" near the Royalston-Warwick line.

The first school was constructed in the Center in 1777. Nine district schoolhouses were built ca. 1797.

Commercial: A two-story, eight-bay tavern was removed from the common in 1874.

Industrial: Royalston Cotton and Wool Manufacturing Company built a mill at South Royalston in 1812 which burned in 1833.

VIII. EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

A. Transportation Routes

In 1847, the Vermont and Massachusetts Railroad opened service through South Royalston along the Millers River corridor in the extreme southern part of town. The early 19-th century roads continued in use.

B. Population

The town's population continued to grow during the first ten years of the period, from 1,493 in 1830 to 1,667 in 1840. From that time the town began a steady decline in numbers that extended throughout the 19th century. By 1870 the town had lost over 200 residents, falling to a total of 1,354. With this decline it is not surprising that immigration of the foreign-born was small, less than 5 percent of the population, and included Irish and small numbers of English and Canadians. Some changes occurred in employment opportunities as manufacturing expanded, but the number of men engaged in farming shrank from 216 in 1820 to 150 in 1830, rising again to 231 in 1875.

With the growth of population in South Royalston a Second Congregational was formed in 1837. In 1836 the Baptists suffered another split when a discussion over moving the meetinghouse to the Center resulted in the formation of a branch of the Athol church there by eleven from West Royalston and seven from Athol. In 1838 they joined with a group of Universalists in the town in the construction of a Union meetinghouse, for use by each on alternate Sabbaths; later the Baptists took the building over until 1863, when the members were dispersed between the neighboring churches in "the City," in Athol, and in New Boston in Winchendon. The Methodists formed a class of sixteen in 1834/35 and built in South Royalston in 1847, amid continuing antagonism from the Orthodox. Catholics attended Mass with Templeton residents in Otter River.

Several private academies operated in the town during the second quarter of the 19th century, followed by the establishment of a public high school by 1852. The town debated for several years before abolishing the district school system in 1867.

With the revival of the Masons, townsmen became members of lodges in Orange and Athol. The town displayed its Whig/Republican political bent with the celebration in 1840 that featured the construction of a birch log cabin.

C. Settlement Pattern

The established villages at Royalston Center and South Royalston continued to grow, while abandonment of marginal agricultural lands occurred. Residential growth in the Center took place mainly in the 1830s and early 1850s, with infill on Main Street and extension north on Frye Hill road and east on South Royalston Road. A Union Society Church was built in 1839, but removed in 1863. Both the third meetinghouse and a town hall were built in 1841. The meetinghouse was replaced in 1851 after burning, and the town hall was replaced by a Second Empire structure in 1867.

Textile manufacturing continued at South Royalston, with a stone mill constructed in 1834 after the early 19th-century mills were destroyed by fire. Chair manufacturing was also introduced by the mid 1830s, and by period's end the mill, smaller shops, and factories lined the north bank of the Millers River. Worker cottage rows were built north of the river on Blossom Street and south on River Street. More substantial residential construction focused upslope on South Royalston Road and High Streets. The Second Congregational Church is built north of the river in 1837, and a commercial/civic focus developed at the South Royalston Road/High Street intersection. The Methodist Church (1847) was built to the west of this.

Doane Falls continued as a small-scale woodworking focus in the southwest. In the west, the Baptist meetinghouse was moved eastward from "Baptist corners" on the western highland to "the City" (West Royalston), east of the Athol-Richmond Road/Warwick Road intersection.

D. Economic Base

E. Architecture

Residential: One- and one-and-one-half-story, Greek Revival side-passage plans dominate the early portion of the period. In South Royalston, a larger number of five-bay, center entry, gable end houses survives. Scattered single-story, center chimney and two-story, double chimney plans remain throughout the town. An Italianate, two-story, brick, gable end, side-passage plan house survives in South Royalston.

Institutional: The 1797 meetinghouse was demolished in 1840 and a third structure erected in its place in 1841. This building burned in 1851 and was replaced with the present Greek Revival gable end structure, which has a slightly advanced Doric portico, pilasters, and a tower with spire. The third Baptist meetinghouse was built west of the Center near the site of the ca. 1804 structure, known as "the City." Another Baptist meetinghouse for a separate society was built in the Center about the same time, but was sold and converted to other uses in 1863. The Second Congregational Church in South Royalston was built in 1837. In 1847, a Methodist Church was also built in South Royalston. This gable end, pilastered Greek Revival building later served as the Grange Hall.

A town hall was built in the Center in 1841 which was subsequently replaced with the present 1867 Italianate structure displaying quoins, a rusticated first floor, mansard roof, and lantern (architect: Chauncey Chase?).

The 1835 Greek Revival gable end center schoolhouse is now the post office.

Commercial: A two-story, gable end period store was noted in South Royalston.

Industrial: The Royalston Cotton and Wool Manufacturing Co. (South Royalston) built a new two-and-a-half-story stone mill with a gabled roof and clerestory and side tower. This structure burned in 1892 and part of the foundation remains. A two-story gabled frame chair shop was built in South Royalston during the period.

IX. LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

A. Transportation Routes

The 19th-century road and rail system continued in use.

B. Population

The pattern of population decline that began in the last period continued through this with brief periods of recovery in the early 20th century. From a total of 1,354 in 1870 the figure dropped to

890 in 1895, a loss of nearly 500. Five years later the town recovered briefly, totaling 958, before dropping to 792 in 1910, and 862 in 1915. Within the population the proportion of foreign-born grew from 6% in 1875 to 18.3% in 1915, but remained low compared to county averages. Within this group, Russian Finns dominated by the period's end, with smaller numbers of Canadians, Italians, and Irish. Agricultural employment declined with the total population, to half the 1875 figure by 1915, as did manufacturing employment, although at a slower rate. The town's dominant denominations, two Congregational and one Baptist church, remained stable, but the Methodists dissolved in 1892, dismissing members to Phillipston and Athol.

The town ceased supporting its own high school during this period, paying tuition to neighboring schools and receiving reimbursement from the state. In 1889, the town had joined with Templeton, Hubbardston, and Phillipston to hire a superintendent, pay a proportional one-fifth of the cost.

The Ladies' Benevolent Society formed a library in 1874, and in 1880, with the Farmers' Club Library, formed the base for a public library. A Grange was formed in the town in 1892, another in South Royalston in 1913. In 1912 the town reversed its previous political position by supporting Roosevelt and the Progressive movement.

C. Settlement Pattern

Development during the period occurred almost exclusively at the South Royalston industrial focus. The stone textile mill was destroyed by fire in 1892, and replaced by a new factory in 1908. American Woolen in 1910 made major additions to the factory complex along the Millers River, and probably added the double row of gambrel, worker duplexes at the north end of the village. The Second Congregational Church burned in 1904, and is replaced in 1906.

At the Center, a few late 19th-century residential additions were made, and a library was built in 1911. The Baptist Church at West Royalston burned in 1894, and was replaced in 1896.

D. Economic Base

E. Architecture

Residential: No apparent major development. Several two-story, gambrel-roofed, double chimney dwellings noted in South Royalston were evidently later worker housing. One is two-story, "Federal Revival" house recorded (ca. 1900).

Institutional: The 1847 Baptist church burned in 1894 and was replaced in 1896 with a Queen Anne type gable end structure. In 1904 the South Royalston Second Congregational church (1837) was destroyed by fire and a new gable end, shingled building (40 x 60 feet) with a sidewall tower was erected in 1906.

The Raymond School on Town Dump Road was constructed in the Colonial Revival mode, being a one-story brick, hipped roof building with quoins.

The public library on the common, designed by Boutwell and Damon of Fitchburg, is one-story, brick, revival style structure.

Commercial: A brick depot with segmental-arched windows and a gable roof appears to have been built during the early portion of the period.

Industrial: The two- and three-story, low-pitched roof buildings with clerestories (one with sidewall tower) constructed for the American Woolen Company in South Royalston dated from the 19th century. The mill functioned into the second quarter of the 20th century, but only ruins are left now.

X. EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

A. Transportation Routes

Main local roads to neighboring communities were improved, particularly the route from Royalston Center southeast through South Royalston to Baldwinsville (Templeton) on South Royalston Road, and the road south to Athol (Athol Road).

B. Population

Little information is available for this period. Population totals continued to fluctuate, between the figures of 862 in 1915 and 795 in 1940, with a low of 744 in 1930. The proportion of foreign-born fell from 18.3% to 12.8% by 1940. That same year, the rural population accounted for 49.2% of the total, fourth highest in the county.

C. Settlement Pattern

No significant settlement developments appear to have occurred during the period.

D. Economic Base

E. Architecture

No apparent development of significance.

XI. SURVEY OBSERVATIONS

Center (historic district) is well inventoried, but aside from that only two other buildings are recorded. South Royalston definitely should be surveyed and other scattered sites recorded.

XII. SOURCES