

# History & Background

## Brief History of Acton

Acton is an upper middle class suburban town in Middlesex County, Massachusetts (U.S.), located about 21 miles west-northwest of Boston along Route 2, west of Concord and about ten miles southwest of Lowell. The Town's population is 21,924 (2010 Census).

Prior to its settlement by farmers from Concord, the area that became present-day Acton was frequented by Nipmuck-related Native Americans who may have practiced some limited agriculture, hunting, fishing and gathering. Many areas of Acton were good campsites, especially areas along Nashoba and Fort Pond Brooks as well as Nagog Pond. Artifacts from early hunting and fishing villages have been found in Acton, in the Pinehawk site in the south of Acton and in the area of Nagog Pond.

### What is A Comprehensive Community Plan?

- a basis for decision making regarding the long-term physical development of the municipality (MGL Ch 41 Sec 81D)
- a process that leads to a plan for action that is based on the Town's values and goals
- a set of priorities for addressing the full range of issues facing the Town

Nearly all of present day Acton's 12,990 acres is comprised of portions of four early land grants. The two largest were: Major Simon Willard's Grant (which became Iron Work Farm), and the New Grant or Concord Village. Next to these grants was the Praying Indian Township of Nashoba Plantation, which lay entirely outside present-day Acton.

The early colonial landscape included large areas of meadows. These prime grazing lands were the reason Concord sought to annex these additional lands in 1655. The earliest European settler was John Law, Concord's shepherd, who built his home in 1656 on School Street near Lawsbrook Road.

By 1730 there were at least two-dozen settlers scattered across the Town. In 1735 Acton was incorporated as a town with the same Open Town Meeting and Board of Selectmen that are still here today. A meetinghouse was built in the center of Town with roads coming from the outlying farms. Although Acton was primarily an agricultural community in its early days, residents were involved in a range of other economic activities, including sawmills, gristmills, the manufacture of barrels to store and ship



Town Center 1890

foodstuffs, a pencil factory, and even a woolen industry centered on the Faulkner Mills in South Acton; one of the first large-scale manufacturers of woolen cloth in this country. Remnants of that original mill still exist.

Only with the arrival of the railroad did the villages really begin to grow, especially West Acton Village. It wasn't until after the Civil War that the railroad finally went through East and North Acton. The rail beds remain today and are locations for the proposed Assabet River Rail Trail and Bruce Freeman Rail Trail.

The 1890s brought a shift in population towards South and West Acton, which caused the precincts and school districts to be realigned. The North and East District Schools were combined

into the Center District. Although the districts were officially changed the residents still thought of the villages as East and North Acton. At the turn of the century Acton was still an agricultural community, with five villages and a population of 2,120. Apples were Acton’s main agricultural export being shipped not only to Boston but to Europe. Before modern refrigeration, space in the cellar of the Town Hall was auctioned off for storage. Apples were stored in the center of West Acton into the 1950s. Improvements were coming however; a water district was formed in 1912 for West and South Acton; the Center was added later. A Town fire department, starting in 1915 with West Acton, replaced the independent fire companies.

1950 marks the shift from apples to houses, with most of that development in the southern half of the Town. There were 3,500 people in Acton in 1950; by 1974 there would be 17,000. The orchards and open fields turned into subdivisions; although Acton still kept its agricultural ties, with apples being a major crop into the 1960s. The Town was then three villages; Acton Center, West Acton and South Acton.



South Acton Train Station



Horse and Buggy



Acton Center School



North Acton School



West Acton Center



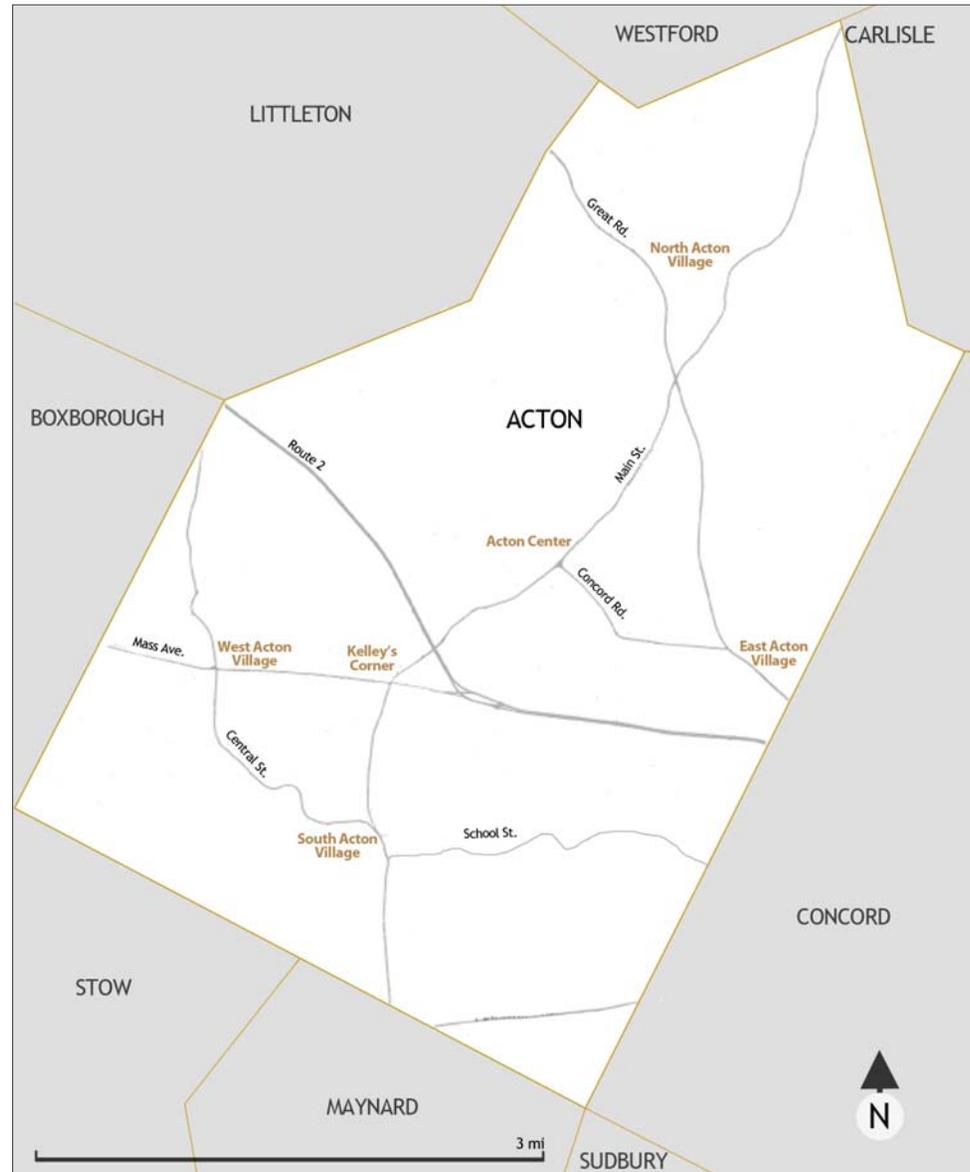
Acton Library

## The Five Village Centers<sup>1</sup> and Kelley's Corner

While Acton Center has been the civic center of the Town since the revolution, the four other village centers earned their nomenclature from the names of their corresponding railroad station.

- **Acton Center** is the civic center of the Town and is the site of the Town Hall, the main public library, a children's playground, an obelisk monument commemorating Acton's role in "the Concord Fight" of the Revolutionary War, a fire station, a Congregational church, a 64-acre arbo-retum and conservation area, and a former post office. The modern post office and the police station are each located about one-half mile away in opposite directions along Main Street. Otherwise, Acton Center is generally a residential area.
- **West Acton** is an important commercial area of town, with shops and businesses centered along Route 111. It developed in response to the opportunities created by the Fitchburg Railroad in the 1840s. West Acton also has a fire station, a playground, a small public library, and two nearby elementary schools, and it is surrounded by extensive neighborhoods.

<sup>1</sup> Based on info from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acton\\_Massachusetts](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acton_Massachusetts)



- **South Acton**, also on the Fitchburg Railroad, used to be the most industrialized area of the Town of Acton. Already in the 18th century, this area held many mills and other small industrial workshops that used water power generated by Fort Pond Brook. Today South Acton has a few small businesses and shops and includes the Jones Faulkner Homestead (‘Faulkner House’), the oldest home still standing in Acton, Jones Tavern, Exchange Hall, a fire station, two playgrounds and ball fields, nearby conservation land, and many surrounding neighborhoods. The South Acton MBTA station is the only rail station on the Fitchburg line still active in Acton.
- **East Acton** was the site of several small 18th Century mills and an early iron forge located along Nashoba Brook. A small commercial area that grew up around the East Acton train station in the 19th century, also called Ellsworth. With the advent of the automobile, and the demise of this branch of the railroad, East Acton became a largely residential area with a sizeable commercial base that is dispersed along the Route 2A corridor.
- **North Acton** is the village located where Main Street (Rt. 27), Harris Street, and Quarry Road come together. Historically, the vil-

lage was associated with quarrying activity in the late 1800s, utilizing the rail line which ran along Rt. 27. Several historic homes are located along Main Street. There is a mixture of commercial and light industrial uses along with single family homes. The North Acton Recreation Area (NARA Park) is located nearby.

- **Kelley’s Corner** is the commercial area at the intersection of Main Street (Rt.27) and Massachusetts Avenue (Rt. 111). Commercial development, primarily retail and restaurant, extends east from this intersection to Rt.2 and along Main Street from Rt. 2 to Prospect Street. Development, which began in the 1950s, took advantage of the roadway access, central location in Acton, and drive-by traffic. The Charter Road school campus and a residential neighborhood are adjacent to the commercially zoned land. The area is characterized by several strip mall-type shopping developments with a significant amount of paved area dedicated to parking. A K-Mart store occupies a large parcel on Main Street south of the principal intersection. Several smaller buildings on separate parcels contain professional and bank offices and restaurant uses. A Sunoco filling station occupies a prominent corner of the intersection, a former muffler shop, now

converted to a restaurant, is on the opposite corner, and Acton Bowl-a-Drome is located to the south. Multifamily housing is also located on three parcels. The area has been served by sewers since 2002.

## Infrastructure

Public infrastructure grew to accommodate the increasing population. A Water District was established in 1912 and a Town-wide Fire Department was established in 1913. In 2005 a new Public Safety Building was built that expanded space for the Police Department and provided for a Joint Dispatch area with the Fire Department. The Acton Water District is a community public water supply that delivers drinking water to the majority (about 90 percent) of the residents of the Town of Acton. Most homes and businesses in Acton (approximately 80%) use private on-site sewage systems (i.e. septic tanks). Higher density developments, such as condominiums and apartment buildings (approximately 10% of the Town) use private sewers that go to small-scale private treatment plants. In 2001, Acton completed its first public sewer system, which serves approximately 10% of the Town, primarily in South Acton. Approximately 45% of Acton households are served with natural gas.

## Schools

“Schools” is among the top responses to the question: “Why did you move to Acton?” and is a critical component of the experience of living in Acton and of building a community. At the beginning of the century, each village in Acton had its own grade school, but until 1925, when the Towne School was built, Acton students were sent to Concord’s high school. In 1953, new schools were constructed to accommodate the growth in the student population. In 1954, Acton and Boxborough created a regional school district for grades 7-12, replacing the Towne School. The Merriam School was constructed in 1958. Other schools quickly followed.<sup>2</sup> In 1967 a building was constructed for the junior high. In 1973 a large addition was added to this building and it became the high school; the junior high moved to the 1954 high school building. Both the junior high and high school were enlarged and renovated in 2000-2005.

Residents tend to place a high value on education and are very proud that the high school, Acton-Boxborough Regional High School, was named a Blue Ribbon School by the U.S. Department of Education in 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas (1966), Gates (1968), and Conant (1971)

Acton has a unique method of assigning students to elementary schools, called “Open Enrollment.” In contrast to surrounding communities which assign elementary schools by neighborhood district, first-time incoming kindergarten parents in Acton participate in a lottery-based selection process where the parents choose the school by listing their preferences in ranked order.

This method of school choice has a significant impact on the nature of the community. Acton is less oriented around neighborhoods than towns that have neighborhood-based schools. While neighborhood ties are reportedly strong and depending on the neighborhood people identify strongly with geography, school choice also results in providing students and their families with opportunities for additional social connections that are independent of their neighborhood.

### Previous Planning Efforts

The Town’s previous master plan was completed in 1991 and updated in 1998. The 1991 Master Plan addressed those issues that most concerned Acton’s residents at the time, mainly traffic, commercial growth management, environmental protection, and affordable housing. The Master Plan proposed strategies for managing com-

mercial development and guiding it into existing village centers and Kelley’s Corner, and for preserving open space by employing the strategy of cluster development.

The 1998 Update was based on the 1991 Master Plan; it did not find that the community values, goals and/or development trends and issues had changed significantly. Instead the 1998 Update refined the main ideas in the 1991 Master Plan. The 1998 Update identifies two underlying and complementary objectives, that of promoting and enhancing village centers as growth areas, and that of preserving open space. The main themes of the Update were as follows:

- Control residential growth
- Preserve Town character, particularly by strengthening the villages for both residential and business uses
- Encourage appropriate economic development to build the tax base and provide a greater variety of goods, services, and employment opportunities in Acton
- Protect the environment and cultural resources
- Calm traffic and encourage non-automobile transportation
- Provide pedestrian and bicycle connections



The recession and subsequent recovery in the early 90s undercut many of the assumptions made in the 1991 Plan. As a result growth assumptions had to be adjusted accordingly in the 1998 Update. The general direction was not altered, just the pace.

While overall, the 1998 Update was ambitious – it contained 12 goals, 65 objectives that articulated these goals more specifically, 126 strate-



gies to achieve the objectives, and 143 actions – an impressive number of these (approximately 70%)<sup>3</sup> have been implemented. In several cases, implementation is ongoing.

### Changes since the 1998 Update

In some ways this Acton 2020 Plan has a similar relationship to the Master Plan 1998 Update that the 1998 Update had to the 1991 Master Plan in that there have not been any significant changes in the Town’s core values.

Residents are still concerned with preserving open space and are very interested in enhancing the village centers. They may, however, be more concerned with environmental sustainability and the economy than they were in 1998. As a result, many of the 1998 Update recommendations are reiterated and refined in the 2020 Plan. The Plan also identifies and supports on-going efforts to continue to implement the previous plan’s goals and objectives.

<sup>3</sup> Through discussion with the Planning Director and follow-up with the Natural Resources and Conservation Department, it was determined that 102 of the actions (70%) were addressed in some manner: 61 actions (42%) were fully implemented, 31 actions (21%) were partially implemented, and 7 actions (5%) were acted upon but not implemented by Town staff, Town boards/commissions, or Town Meeting.

### What has changed since the 1998 Plan

- **Demographics, primarily in the form of:**
  - an increase in the elderly population.
  - an increase in the Asian population.
  - changes in the projected school enrollments which, in contrast to the period between 1991 and 1998 when they grew faster than forecasted growth (resulting in the need for a school expansion program), are instead expected to decline resulting in increased fiscal capacity.
- **Awareness with regard to planning issues, including environmental sustainability, relationship between planning and health and wellness, and smart growth principles.**
- **Market trends such as growing demand for smaller housing units in walkable neighborhoods.**
- **The public outreach conducted for the 2020 Plan was much more extensive so that it can be said that the 2020 Plan perhaps has broader understanding, support, and political will to implement the recommendations.**