

ACTON HISTORIC RESOURCE INVENTORY AND LOCAL HISTORIC DISTRICT FORMATION

COMPLETION REPORT

1. Description of Project

The Town of Acton received a matching Survey and Planning Grant, from the National Park Service, Department of the Interior through the Massachusetts Historical Commission, to complete its town-wide comprehensive survey, prepare a list of National Register eligible properties, and assist a Local Historic District Study Committee in forming boundaries, bylaw, and guidelines for three potential local historic districts. Preservation consultants, Gretchen Schuler of Wayland, MA assisted by Julie Johnson of Cambridge, MA was hired to conduct the survey of the potential district areas, guide volunteers in survey work, and consult with the Local Historic District Study Committee. The work was completed July 2, 1990.

2. Methodology

The Historic Resource Survey of the Town of Acton began with meetings between the consultants, Gretchen Schuler and Julie Johnson, and the Acton Historical Commission, the Acton Historic District Study Committee, Project Manager and Town Planner Roland Bartl, and volunteer surveyors. The purpose of these meetings was to familiarize all parties with the survey process as well as establish goals for the volunteer survey group and the district study committee.

The consultants then familiarized themselves with the resources included in the bibliography and with the different areas of the Town by way of a windshield survey. Previously completed survey forms were reviewed including those on file at the Massachusetts Historical Commission and the Acton Town Hall. Approximately 70 inventory forms from 1974 were on file with the MHC. An additional 70 were in the files of the Acton Historical Commission, most completed in the late 1980s. All have been used in preparing a new inventory sheet for each of those properties for which more detailed architectural descriptions and statements of context have been added.) The consultants prepared an extensive index of all properties that appropriately would be included in the Acton Comprehensive Historic Resource Inventory.

As part of Phase I the consultants also prepared a brief synopsis of the procedures necessary to establish local historic districts. It was a ten step list to be used in conjunction with the MHC booklet Establishing Local Historic Districts. This brief strategy paper is attached.

The survey work completed by the consultants included the potential areas for local historic district designation, Acton Centre, South Acton, and West Acton. The method for recording information about properties followed the accepted format of assessment of architectural significance, photograph, location map and other pertinent physical conditions related to context. It was decided that the survey forms for potential local historic district properties would be more comprehensive than usual including detailed architectural description useful for potential review. Also survey forms were completed for all non-contributing properties within these areas for

which local historic district designation was recommended.

Information about the historical significance of properties was gathered by consulting the historic maps, atlases, and birdseye views. Further investigation included review of town records, histories, oral histories, old photographs, and other information in the extensive files of the Acton Historical Society available through the willing assistance of Betsy Conant. This research helped the consultants to gain an understanding of individual property's place in the development of Acton.

A wealth of information is also available for South Acton through the notes of the late Robert Nylander who devoted years to scholarly research of Acton's history through its architecture. These notes were the basis for the recently published "Mill Corner: An Architectural History", which was also an important resource to the consultants.

Completed survey forms include a photograph, sketch map, other pertinent information that identifies the property such as building material, style, date, setting and detailed statements of architectural and historical significance. The bibliography/reference section of each survey form will only include abbreviated listings, for which the full references are available in the attached Bibliography. National Register criteria was applied to each property and eligibility noted on the appropriate forms. A final list of National Register eligible properties is included in the final report.

All properties included in the Acton survey have been plotted on a base map made available by the Acton Office of Engineers. The numbers correspond to the historic resource index which includes a map number, property address, date of construction, and building style. The map number is the Massachusetts Historical Commission inventory form number.

An overview history of Acton as well as separate narrative histories for the three proposed historic districts in the way of Area Forms have been prepared by the consultants. The overview history attempts to integrate extant architecture and landscape features with the historical information and refers to individual properties as examples. A final bibliography for the project is attached to the overview history.

The success of this project has depended in part on close communication among the Historic District Study Committee, the Historical Commission, the local survey volunteers, and the consultants. The volunteer work taken on by residents in the community has been successful and allowed the community to have a more comprehensive inventory than would have been possible with only the consultants' work.

3. Explanation of Accomplishments

The work products as described in the contract have been accomplished. The index is more inclusive than is reflected in the prepared forms because it was determined that approximately 600 properties were worthy of inclusion in the inventory and time and resources for only 500 were available. Much of the preparatory work for documenting the additional 100 properties has been done and the Acton Historical Commission plans to complete these in the near future. Thus the inventory that has been completed as of July 1, 1990 includes:

Area Forms (A).....	10
Building Forms (B).....	450
Burial Ground Forms.....	3
Object and Structure Forms (C and F).....	9
Landscape Forms (H).....	3

The Area Forms have been used in three ways. There are four large areas that developed into distinct areas including:

East Acton.....	Area Form A
Acton Centre.....	Area Form B
West Acton.....	Area Form C
South Acton.....	Area Form F

All properties within each of the areas B, C. and F have been individually surveyed to prepared for possible local historic district nomination. For this reason there are a number of non-historic buildings included in the comprehensive survey index. This status is indicated by a (nc) meaning "non-contributing" following the map number of each non-historic building.

Within the above named large areas or self sufficient villages are small areas that are better described as complexes including:

Mead Co./Spruce St.....	Area Form D (C/D)
Hall Brothers (Central St.).....	Area Form E (C/E)
South Acton Lumber.....	Area Form G (F/G)
Faulkner Mills.....	Area Form H (F/H)

Of the two letter symbol (eg. C/D), the first letter indicates the area within which the sub area or complex lies.

Finally there are two small residential areas that are not included in a larger area and in which there are similar type properties with parallel development patterns including:

Kinsley Street Area.....	Area Form I
20th Century Main	Area Form J

There are several parts of researching a town's history that are beyond the scope of a comprehensive survey. The rudimentary historical information has been gathered and additional facts about properties can be added at any time. In doing a comprehensive survey of this nature the consultants and volunteers have not conducted deed research and property owner interviews, except in

selected instances.

The consultants met several times with the Local Historic District Study Committee. District boundary recommendations were made in two stages. One set of boundaries was inclusive and considered all properties within the three village centers, Acton Centre, South Acton and West Acton, that are related historically and architecturally. These recommendations amounted to over 250 properties which would be too large a district for a volunteer district commission to administer review. Thus more restrictive sets of boundaries for South and West Acton were recommended forming core districts of properties that are closely related in patterns of development and having architecture that is reflective of those patterns and periods of development. Once the core districts are established, the Commission could recommend that Town Meeting vote to expand the districts for which the preparatory work of survey is already in place.

This project has been the result of a cooperative effort of the Acton Historical Commission, a sub-committee of volunteer survey workers, the Acton Local Historic District Study Committee and the consultants. The support of the staff of the Planning Department and the Engineers Office has been excellent and facilitated the process.

AMENDMENT TO METHODOLOGY FOR ACTON SURVEY AND PLANNING PROJECT

The Inventory of Acton's Historic Resources has been worked on for the last twenty years. For a substantial number of the properties included in the 1990 survey there is information that has been gathered in the 1960s, in 1973-1975, and more recently in 1987-1988. The Massachusetts Historical Commission has survey forms for approximately 80 properties. Most of these were completed in 1973-1974. An additional 100 forms (approximation) have been prepared by the Acton Historical Commission in 1987-1988. They are in the Acton Historical Commission files in the Acton Town Hall. The location of most of the properties for which there is useful information is South Acton including Central, Maple, and School Streets. In West Acton some information has been gathered for Windsor Street and part of Central Street. Much of the work was a compilation of Robert Nylander's notes which are extensive and contain highly reliable information. The consultants have added detailed architectural descriptions and statements of historical context to these recently prepared survey forms. For those properties that are included in the proposed districts a new form has been completed. Any information on old forms has been included and the person doing the initial research and writing (for those forms completed recently in the 1987-1988 efforts) has been recorded on the new forms.

ACTON HISTORIC RESOURCE SURVEY

NATIONAL REGISTER ELIGIBLE PROPERTIES

The following list of National Register eligible properties is conservative and has been developed with an appreciation for the time involved in preparing nominations. There are many properties that would be eligible under the old Multiple Resource Area format, but that are not part of a district or only a weak district with intrusions or weak association. These marginal properties and or districts could be pursued at a later date; however, the following list is challenging and provides substantial amount of National Register work.

Acton Centre

Most of Acton Centre has already been nominated to the National Register. Those buildings not listed in the 1982 nomination that are included in the local historic district recommendation are eligible for listing as an amendment to the existing nomination. They are:

#s 427, 430, 431, 437, 438, 445, 446, 451, 452 Main Street. These properties are eligible under Criteria

A - contributing to an understanding of the development of the town's civic and institutional center;

C - representing mid 19th century architecture consistent with the buildings already included in the nomination.

South Acton

There are three small districts and two individual recommendations for nomination to the National Register in South Acton. The number of intrusions in the core make a large National Register district difficult in spite of the strong historical association of the various properties. Recommended for National Register listing are:

21 Liberty Street - Liberty Tree House and

100 Martin Street - Knights Forbush House.

Both properties are of First Period construction and upon additional physical analysis the properties could possibly be amended to the recently accepted First Period Thematic Nomination of First Period Houses.

140 Main Street - Universalist Church.

The Church is representative of the need for a separate religious society in South Acton pointing towards the self sufficiency of the village and as the only local representation of Stick Style architecture.

NATIONAL REGISTER (continued)

Central Street - Jones/Tuttle Historic District including #s 21, 27, and 31 for Criteria:

A - contributing to an understanding of the development of the industrial center, particularly the association with Tuttle, Jones, & Wetherbee.

C - the excellent representation of the Italianate style often used in Acton and the Second Empire style not often used locally.

Maple-Martin Streets New England Village Historic District including #s 41 to 77 (odd) and #s 44 to 76 (even) on Maple Street and #s 21 to 29 (odd) on Maple Street for Criteria:

A - contributing to an understanding of the development of the industrial and commercial center as well as representative of an early subdivision with much of the work being that of a few local carpenters and craftsmen.

C - the representation of varying sized of gable front cottages with varying degrees of architectural elaboration.

School-River Street Mill and Commercial Historic District including #s 5 and 11-15 Chadwick Street, #s 94, 96, 97, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105-107, 106, 113, 124, 127, 128, and 129 Main Street as well as the bridge and the dam at Mill Corner, #s 1 to 81 (odd and even) River Street, and #s 4 to 80 (even) and #s 3 to 115 (odd) School Street for Criteria:

A - contributing to an understanding of the development of the commercial center and industrial mills on River Street as well as the residential properties built to accommodate the growing population in the mid to late 19th century railroad community.

C - the representation of a variety of styles and plans used for residential, commercial, institutional, and industrial properties at the core of South Acton Village.

NATIONAL REGISTER (continued)

West Acton

There are four individual and one district recommendations for nomination to the National Register in West Acton. The number of intrusions at the core of the village reduce the district nominations possibilities substantially. Recommended for individual listing are:

- # 264 Central Street - Oliver W. Mead House
- # 282 Central Street - Odd Fellows Hall
- # 585 Massachusetts Avenue - Bradley M. Stone House
- # 18 Wright Terrace - George V. Mead House

Each of these properties is individually eligible for Criteria:

- A - contributing to an understanding of the development of the community through the lives of those associated with the property.
- C - the representation of the style of architecture and examples of work of local craftsmen.

Windsor Avenue Historic District including #s 21 to 61 (odd) and #s 24 to 62 (even) on Windsor Avenue for Criteria:

- A - representation of turn of the century expansion of West Acton Village with many substantial dwellings for successful local businessmen.
- C - representation of well detailed late 19th century architecture most built by local craftsman, John Hoar.

There are a number of other properties in West Acton that may be eligible with more research. On Central Street, the Teele House (311) and the icehouse (315) may constitute a small two building district if in fact # 315 Central Street is the only remaining icehouse in Acton and if physical investigation of the interior of this property reveals evidence substantiating the authenticity of this building. Another possible district that appears to be fragmented includes several properties on Massachusetts Avenue near Wright and Mead Terrace, and a few properties on Arlington Street including the Isaac Davis Birthplace and the late 19th century houses on the opposite side of the street. There are intrusions in this possible district and the association among the properties is not as substantial as is the association in other proposed districts.