

**LITCHFIELD
HISTORIC RESOURCES
SURVEY**

1988



NASHUA REGIONAL PLANNING COMMISSION

LITCHFIELD HISTORIC RESOURCES SURVEY

Prepared by the Nashua Regional Planning Commission

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INTRODUCTION

The Litchfield Historic Resources Survey was funded in part by a grant from the New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources, with matching funds appropriated by the Litchfield Planning Board. This survey is part of a statewide effort to identify and help preserve significant resources, such surveys are mandated by State and Federal law, specifically the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966.

The survey was conducted during the summer of 1988 by Lisa Mausolf, Preservation Specialist with the Nashua Regional Planning Commission. Historical research into the properties was performed by a number of volunteers led by local resident, Claudette Durocher who put in countless hours researching and coordinating the survey on the local level. Those assisting the research effort included Florence Leary, Steven Calawa, Pat Jewett, Candace Hale, Cecile Durocher, Rebecca Fawcett, Ellen-Ann Robinson, Thelma Besse, Marilyn Dickenson, Claudia Danielson, Inez Nelson, Diane Jerry, Olive Campbell and Trudy Dorgan. The lack of a town history made the work of this committee critical in finally putting Litchfield's history down on paper. All of the buildings covered by the survey were photographed by a team composed of Quentin Lewis, Joan McKibben, Donald Sordillo and Claudette Durocher.

The survey targeted approximately seventy five structures, fifty years or older along Rt. 3A in Litchfield. Each of the structures were identified by their common name, address, tax map/parcel number and UTM reference point based on a U.S. Geologic Survey Map. Every building, including major outbuildings, was photographed and described in narrative form. Information on style, age and condition were also noted. Some attempt was made where possible to evaluate the structure's integrity and eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places, both as an individual property and a district. A rough site map (not to scale) is also included on each form.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Some of the earliest Litchfield residents were the Naticook Indians, led by Chief Passaconaway, who were attracted by the farming potential of the fertile floodplains of the Merrimack River. Recent archaeological excavations have identified artifacts and other evidence of Indian settlements along the Merrimack's banks prior to the 1600s. The progress of King Philip's war forced the Indians to ultimately depart from the Merrimack Valley and the area they knew as "Naticook", which included portions of the Towns of Merrimack and Litchfield as we know them today.

A series of land grants were created following the Indians' retreat from the area, with the primary white settlers coming from Massachusetts during the mid 1600s to the early 1700s. In 1656 Massachusetts granted the greater part of Naticook to William Brenton, an explorer and fur trader. It was known as "Brenton's Farm" until incorporated as a township. By 1728 there were sixteen owners of the "Farm" though all were non-residents.

Most of the families who settled on the land were of English origin, although a few Irish emigrants became permanent settlers. On July 3, 1734 the General Assembly of Massachusetts approved Litchfield's charter as a

township to include the lands on both sides of the Merrimack River. In 1741, the division between the states of New Hampshire and Massachusetts occurred, providing the groundwork for the actual Merrimack-Litchfield split which became official with the passage of Merrimack's charter on April 2, 1746.

Throughout the 1700s and 1800s farming continued to be a major industry in Litchfield. In 1885 E. F. McQuesten, M.D. in his "History of Litchfield" (from the History of Hillsborough County) notes that in point of wealth, Litchfield ranked among the first farming towns in the State. The fertility of the soil was impaired only by the annual inundations of local farms by the Merrimack River.

The main public road connecting Litchfield with Manchester and Hudson was laid out, as early as 1734, through the farming district. The alignment of this road approximated the current location of Rt. 3A or the Charles Bancroft Highway as it is known today. Running the length of Litchfield, inland from the river, this road has historically functioned as the critical spine of town along which homes and services were oriented. Changes in location have been slight as evidenced by the close proximity with which most of the Litchfield's historic houses front the road. In contrast to the town center plans which ordered many early New England towns, Litchfield's is a linear development, following the topography of the river. Virtually all of the construction in town took place along this corridor and it is along Rt. 3A that virtually all of the town's historic structures are found today.

In 1737 the Old Meeting House was built on the banks of the Merrimack River across from where the present Town Hall stands. In the early 1800s the Merrimack experienced a shift in its course, eliminating some Litchfield land and adding to the size of Merrimack. The shift in the river came too close to the Old Meeting House, forcing the Town to dismantle it and build the existing Town Hall in 1851. Headstones from the cemetery were relocated in back of the Church.

The first ferry was established by the town in 1740. The landing on the east side of the river was in the center of the town, on the river line, and near the meetinghouse. Two ferries, Thornton's and Reed's, historically served Litchfield, linking east and west shores of the Merrimack. By the early 19th century, Litchfield had an extremely prosperous trade, evidenced by two general merchandise stores and a fleet of twenty canal boats carrying its production to Lowell and onto Boston through the Middlesex Canal, returning with merchandise for all points along the river as far as Concord. Litchfield's timber and lumber trades were prominent during this era and along with the brick manufactured locally, found a ready market to the south.

Litchfield's prosperous trade was dealt a serious blow by the completion of the Concord Railroad on the west side of the Merrimack River in 1842. As the canal boats were increasingly unable to compete against the railroad and lacking access to the business world, Litchfield entered a new era. As evidenced by the historic buildings which survive in Litchfield today, building construction dropped to a standstill after the 1840s and the local economy was no doubt visibly shaken. Population began a slow decline and

those who chose to remain redirected their energies to farming, the only viable industry in town. By 1885 many of Litchfield's young sons were engaged in business outside of Litchfield, some in nearby communities like Pelham, Merrimack and Nashua but others as far away as San Francisco, Washington, D.C. and Boston. Litchfield was not to regain its previous population peak of nearly 500 for well over a century. After reaching a peak of nearly 500 from 1830 to 1850 the population of Litchfield declined in the late 19th century as it did in most rural New Hampshire communities which faced a general exodus to the cities and out west.

The major effect to impact Litchfield in the early 20th century would have to be the laying out of the Manchester and Nashua Street Railway. Early in 1903, a group of Manchester, Litchfield and Hudson residents organized the Goffs Falls, Litchfield and Hudson Street Railway to construct and operate an interurban route between Manchester and Nashua, via Litchfield and Hudson. Isaac N. Center of Litchfield served as president of the group. Construction finally began in 1906 and by late August more than 300 men were at work building the grade and laying track and ties. By late October construction cars were being operated over the line as far south as Litchfield Center. Work was completed by the time winter set in although several stretches had to be reballasted and realigned in the coming year. Regular service began January 1, 1907. The name of the line was changed to Manchester and Nashua Street Railway in February.

The route of the rail began at Goffs Falls in Manchester, following the highway for about a half mile and then continuing on private way, 50 feet in width, first on one and then on the other side of the highway to the intersection of Webster and Ferry Streets in Hudson. The private right of way was fenced the entire distance. In Litchfield the track was closely aligned to the existing highway, the present Rt. 3A. A turnout was located at the halfway point in Litchfield.

Hourly service was available throughout the day on both weekdays and Sundays until the abandonment of the line in 1931. Although local traffic from Litchfield itself was light, through riding was fairly heavy as the train provided much more frequent service than did the competing Boston and Maine Railroad on the opposite side of the river. One unusual feature of the line was the accommodation provided residents of Reeds Ferry village in Merrimack. The half way turnout in Litchfield was very close to the river and a large bell was installed beside the track at that point. Passengers for Reeds Ferry, upon leaving the trolley, had only to ring the bell, walk down to the river bank and wait for a boatman to ferry them across the stream. Increasing automobile competition marked the end of the line in 1931 although the right of way is still visible in various areas of Litchfield.

Regionally, the early 1900s saw a flourishing of the textile industries and paper companies in nearby Nashua and Manchester. By the mid twenties, these were joined by shoe factories. The prosperity of the mills was to be shortlived however and by 1950 there was a shift of the textile industries from the northeast to more favorable southern climates. Fortunately for the Nashua area this was offset by an influx of other industries beginning in the 50's including electronics firms. From 1950 to 1980 the Nashua region experienced rapid growth in technology related

industries and this was to have a major impact on Litchfield and other nearby "bedroom" communities.

From the late 19th century until 1940, Litchfield's population hovered at a level near 300 persons. But by the time of the 1960 census Litchfield, along with much of southern New Hampshire found itself caught in a period of dramatic growth. During the period from 1950 to 1960 Litchfield's population nearly doubled to 721, nearly doubling again between 1960 and 1970 to a 1970 benchmark of 1,420.

Even two decades of such intense growth did little to prepare the town for the 1970s. Even when compared to neighboring towns, the region and the state Litchfield has exhibited exceptionally dramatic growth in recent years. During the 1970s Litchfield's rate of population growth tripled to a population of 4,150 making it unsurpassed within the region and one of the fastest growing communities in the state. Current population estimates suggest that Litchfield's growth trend of recent years is continuing in the 1980s, although at a somewhat slower pace. Yet the dramatic growth experienced by surrounding towns will continue to increase development pressure on Litchfield as will the planned construction of the Nashua-Hudson Circumferential Highway which will make Litchfield more accessible than it is now and more vulnerable to development.

The effects of such explosive growth manifest themselves in a variety of ways including decreasing open space, increasing traffic and increasing demand for public services and housing stock. Such growth also serves to make surviving historic structure even more precious. According to the 1980 U.S. Census, only 8.3% of Litchfield's housing units were built before 1940 as compared to a statewide average of 39%.

The historic resources which survive along Rt. 3A do much to define the town's rural character. Often taken for granted by those who have grown accustomed to its appearance, the simple farmhouses, agricultural buildings, town center and open spaces along Rt. 3A present a strong image to tourists and others passing through town as well as those in neighboring communities who have lost their similar character in recent years.

It is the responsibility of the community to plan a program of historical protection, based on local needs and desires. It is hoped that this inventory will encourage a greater appreciation of Litchfield's historic resources by local residents. Establishment of a local historic district along parts of Rt. 3A should be considered. The local historic district is the most comprehensive preservation tool available to towns to enable them to have some say in the shape and appearance of development in historic areas. This survey could also be instrumental in preparing a nomination of certain historic structures to the National Register of Historic Places. At the very least, nomination of a small district of the buildings around the Town Hall and church, embodying the only real "center" in town, should be pursued. Hopefully the foundation generated by this survey will act as a departure point for Litchfield to act to protect and enhance the historic resources which are so important to the town's distinctive character.