

STRATHAM, NH, MASTER PLAN—HISTORICAL RESOURCES

The purpose of the Historical Resources section of the Master Plan is to determine and propose priorities for the preservation, protection, and management of Stratham's historic and cultural resources. Preservation is not meant to slow or stop development; rather, it seeks to recognize the value of that which is already here. These resources (which include farms, houses, cemeteries, churches, parks, schools and other town buildings as well as landscapes and sites of archeological or historic interest) define the character of the town and contribute to its sense of place and quality of life. It is unlikely that anybody would intentionally dismantle the history of a town, but whenever a historic site is altered or removed, our understanding and enjoyment of the town's heritage is diminished.

BRIEF HISTORY OF STRATHAM, NH

In Stratham, as elsewhere on the continent, Native American Indians were the sole occupants of the territory until the arrival of European explorers and settlers. Squamscott Indians, who inhabited the area, had their population reduced by several causes including exposure to small pox from Captain John Smith's sailors in 1616. Prehistoric archaeological sites are providing information regarding the cultural traditions of the early inhabitants. Several partial excavations, featuring hearths, tools, arrowheads, pottery and foundations, originally were semi-permanent villages or seasonal camps.

Stratham is located in Rockingham County, New Hampshire's earliest settled area. In 1623, European settlers were attracted by the region's location and natural resources—lumber, rivers, furs and fertile soil. Settlements were under Massachusetts Bay Colony's jurisdiction; however, by 1697, New Hampshire became a separate province. In 1623, Edward Hilton, a member of the Fishmongers' Guild of London, immigrated to Dover Point to engage in commercial fishing. Seven years later, he obtained the Squamscott Patent for the upland "River Piscataquack" territory from the powerful Council for New England. This area on the south side of Piscataqua River and Great Bay extended from Dover Point to the Squamscott River falls in Exeter.

Settling in Dover in 1633, noted community leader Captain Thomas Wiggin, affiliated with the Puritan authorities of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, was hired by associates of Hilton from Bristol and Shrewsbury, England, to serve as agent in charge of the Shrewsbury Patent. Wiggin, later Governor of the Dover settlement, built a house in Stratham in 1639. Under the authority of Massachusetts in 1656, the Squamscott Patent was divided into three parcels. The middle section was assigned to Wiggin and his partners and the southern one, to the company known as the "Shrewsbury Men," with Wiggin as the agent. The Town of Stratham was located within both parcels.

In the mid-1660's, Stratham's population consisted of four families (Wiggin, Veasey, Scammon and Waldron) who owned all the land. Yet, it did not take long for others to discover the area's fertile soils and relatively level topography enabled them to grow successful fruit and vegetable crops as well as feed grains for cattle and hogs and hops for brewing beer.

The King's Great Highway (Portsmouth Avenue), originally referred to as Country Way, became an important thoroughfare for transportation between the seaport and the interior. Today's highway follows much of the same route as it first did in 1681. (After Independence from Britain, the road's name was changed to Main Road. From 1902 to 1913, when there was a trolley line, it was known locally as "the electric road." Car barns, located at the Route 108 traffic circle, were destroyed by fire in 1965.) Whereas homes were situated in clustered areas throughout town, businesses and public buildings were located along this stretch of road between Portsmouth and Exeter. For travelers and residents there were numerous taverns, three of which still exist as private homes: Chase Tavern on Emery's Lane, Kenniston Tavern at the corner of Portsmouth Avenue and Depot Road and the Peabody House on Winnicutt Road.

Trades supporting the farming community were established. In the early 1700's there were saw and grist mills and blacksmith shops. Three blacksmith shops were located near what presently is the convergence of Routes 108 and 33 (William Pottle, operator), on Gifford Farm (Captain Folsom, operator) and the intersection of Stratham Lane and Portsmouth Avenue (David Norton, operator).

Sixteen shareholders financed the first sawmill, built by David Jewell on a dammed section of the Winnicutt River. (The mill existed almost two centuries until it burned in 1893.) David's grandson, Levi, added a starch mill to convert potatoes to starch at the location. Later he built a gristmill on the Winnicutt River and thus owned and operated three mills at one time. The Jewell mills ran until 1952 and were demolished in 1962. The gristmill had the distinction of being the oldest operating gristmill in the state. In the 1930s measured drawings and photographs of the gristmill were included in the Historic American Buildings Survey.

Population increased to 35 inhabitants in 1703, 50 in 1709. People paid taxes to Hampton and traveled to Exeter to attend the nearest meetinghouse. It soon became time to petition the governor and council for a town charter. There were 58 signers on the "Petition to be Set Off a Township." On March 20, 1716, Stratham became the sixth New Hampshire town to be incorporated. At the first town meeting, April 10, 1716, officers were elected to oversee the construction of a meetinghouse. The church on Daniel Leavitt's land (near the present Congregational Church) was completed in 1718. On the same site, a second meetinghouse was built in 1768; a third, in 1837. Rev. Henry Rust served as the first minister. In 1771, the Baptist Church was erected near Emery's Lane; a second church, in 1840. In the early 1980's the structure was moved next to the Congregational Church to become an annex. The Middle Christian church was organized in 1812, built at the corner of Winnicutt Road and Portsmouth Avenue and demolished by 1930.

In 1775, the population had reached 1137. Additional trades—cooperages, cider mills, tanneries and textile mills—were established in the mid-1700's. A sawmill and Tom Speed's brickyard were located near Thompson's Brook. A sawmill, gristmill and Major Barker's cloth mill were on Sawmill Brook. Tanneries were on Portsmouth Avenue adjacent to Depot Road. To supply his shoemaking business, Samuel Lane, a prominent townsman, built his own tannery next to the pond located on the current Route33/108 circle.

By 1786, the population had declined to 907 and remained constant to 1800. According to a town map, drawn by Phineas Merrill in 1793, there were 133 dwellings, excluding mills and outbuildings. Five mills operated. The early 1800's witnessed town boundary changes. Greenland annexed part of Stratham in 1805 and again in 1847. The Stratham-Newmarket boundary changed in 1805, 1807 and 1818. The 1847 boundaries remain.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Portsmouth and Concord Railroad passed through Stratham. This led to increased mobility and access to markets. Mills and machinery were valued at \$2,330 in 1859. The town continued primarily as an agricultural community, renowned for fruit producing. Its superior apples were found not only in United States markets but also in London. Josiah Brown sold over 200 barrels of cider in one year. Potatoes and strawberries were cultivated extensively. Hay and rye were grown to feed dairy and beef stock (Ayrshires, Holsteins and Herefords). In the early 1900's, 52 dairies existed. Daily, quantities of milk were shipped throughout New Hampshire and to Boston markets.

With the 1870 construction of a train depot, Stratham farmers geared their agricultural products to a market economy. They grew many varieties of fruits and vegetables. Expanded greenhouse operations enabled them to lengthen growing seasons and produce quality produce. George Gowen Farms sent tons of lettuce and strawberries to Boston markets. At the intersection of Emery's Lane and Portsmouth Avenue, J. Fred Emery's produce stand was the most renown locally. Still, by 1890, the population declined to 680.

At the end of the nineteenth century, water from sulphur springs, discovered on Andrew Wiggin's Portsmouth Avenue homestead, was sold for medicinal purposes to cure numerous maladies. This discovery along with the promotion of New Hampshire tourism resulted in visitors coming from miles around to "partake of the cure." (Each spring, Stratham had another tourist attraction—apple blossoms.) During this era, the Elms at the intersection of Portsmouth Avenue and Winnicutt Road became a great resort hotel. Near this intersection, the Town Hall—in which the library also was located—was constructed in 1877. In 1911, the Wiggin Memorial Library was built and given to the town by George A. and Emma B. Wiggin. Today this building houses the Stratham Historical Society.

The 1940 census records 643 residents. Train service ended in 1954 as the use of the automobile increased. Agriculture no longer needed to be the mainstay of residents, who could travel elsewhere for employment. With the move away from farming, the local Winnicutt Grange, founded in 1892, held its final meetings during 1997. Since 1994, several medium-sized businesses have located in Stratham. Among these are Timberland (retail, outdoor

sport equipment and catalog company), Lindt-Sprugli, Inc. (chocolate manufacturer), Vitronics Soltec (computer assembly machinery), Staples (office products, retail and catalog company), Bell & Flynn (sand, gravel and construction company), Shaw's and Market Basket (supermarkets) and a number of car dealerships. Yet, the town never has developed as an industrial or commercial center but has become a "bedroom community", as have other nearby towns, with increased numbers of residential dwellings.

During the 1980's, population increased from 2507 to 4955 while housing units climbed from 844 to 1917. By 1994, the population was 5,393. A decade later, according to the 2004 vital statistics, there were 2,711 "building values." In 2005, population reached 7,098 to rank 45th among New Hampshire's incorporated cities and towns. Even with growth, the community continued to keep its rural character due to large holdings of several landowners.

In 2007, it was determined that remaining in Stratham were 47 homes dating between 1700 and 1799 with 17 of them located on Portsmouth Avenue; 67 homes, between 1800 and 1899 with 18 on Portsmouth Avenue; 122 homes, between 1900 and 1957 with 21 on Portsmouth Avenue.

PRESERVATION ACTIVITY IN STRATHAM

Stratham is fortunate that it still has structures, sites and landscapes illustrative of all its periods of history. However, many of Stratham's historic sites and features have been lost or compromised, and its heritage as an agricultural and trading community is increasingly difficult to discern. The 1985 Master Plan warned that residential and agricultural areas were under increasing pressure from commercial development. This is a situation that has not been resolved and that poses a threat to historic structures and sites. At the same time, the town has, through a number of means, acted to protect and preserve its historic and cultural resources.

ZONING

Zoning, first introduced to Stratham in 1957, can be a means to protect community character. Amendments to Stratham's zoning ordinance have taken additional steps in that direction. These include amendments to protect stone walls and to establish a process of demolition review. Based on public hearings and voting on town ballots, it appears that the community is largely satisfied with the current structure of zoning districts and is resistant to encroachment upon the Residential/Agricultural Zone. One disadvantage of conventional zoning is that it can have unintended consequences, leading to results at odds with the original intent of promoting healthy growth while preserving community character.

FARMS AND AGRICULTURAL BUILDINGS

Farms and agricultural buildings are an important part of Stratham's history and culture. Since RSA 79-D was passed in 2002, the Selectmen have approved preservation easements for four important barns that meet the statutory qualifications. In 1985 the town purchased the Gifford Farm in order to secure and preserve a significant agricultural property that abuts the Stratham Hill Park.

STRATHAM HILL PARK

In 2007 Stratham Hill Park celebrated its 100th anniversary. The celebration served to mark not only the anniversary but also the importance that the park continues to have in the town's cultural life as a natural landmark and as a recreational and event site, most notably for the Stratham Fair. The Veterans' Garden, dedicated on November 11, 2001, is a site for commemoration and tribute. The continuing vitality of this park plays an important role in the preservation of the town's culture and heritage.

STRATHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The Stratham Historical Society, founded in 1970, has developed into a strong voice for the town's heritage while developing a significant collection of artifacts, documents, and manuscripts. In 1985 the Historical Society prepared a list and map of eighty historical properties and sites. That list was enhanced in 2001 by a photographically documented list of the surviving structures that appeared on the important Phinehas Merrill map of 1793. The Historical Society's 1985 map and list, its 2001 list of houses mapped in 1793, and the Rockingham Planning Commission's map and table prepared for the 1997 Master Plan were all used to prepare the Map and Table of Historic Resources which accompanies this Master Plan.

HERITAGE COMMISSION

In 1997, the town voted to establish a Heritage Commission in accordance with the provisions of RSA 673 and 674. The mission of the Commission is to “recognize, use, and protect resources... that are valued for their historic, cultural, aesthetic, or community significance...” At the request of the Selectmen, the Commission undertook and completed the design and installation of a Veterans’ Garden at Stratham Hill Park. In 2004 the Heritage Commission undertook the production and sale of copies of the official town flag. In 2007 the Heritage Commission voted to initiate a survey of historical resources (see below) as the most important next step in fulfilling its mandate.

CONSERVATION EASEMENTS

The vote in 2002 approving a \$5 million bond for conservation purposes and setting up an Ad Hoc Conservation Bond Subcommittee to administer the conservation effort was an important milestone in Stratham’s efforts to preserve its character and heritage for the enjoyment of its residents and for the future health of the town. At hearings and at the Town Meeting, both the discussions and the ultimate vote (462 yes/63 no) revealed the extent to which long-time residents and newcomers alike are concerned about preserving what remains of the rural, agricultural character of the town.

ARCHAEOLOGY

Stratham contains many historic and prehistoric sites of varying degrees of sensitivity and importance. They range from prehistoric sites that are thousands of years old to many historic sites from the 17th to 19th centuries. Stratham is fortunate to contain several sites which are important to understanding the 17th-century “contact period” in the Great Bay region, a relatively undocumented period in the history of this northern plantation of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

In the first half of the 20th century there was considerable amateur interest in archaeology. Students at the Plains School explored nearby fields and woods seeking surface finds from ancient Indian settlements. Farmers picked artifacts from plowed fields and added them to their casual collections. Isolated finds are still made as artifacts find their way to the surface.

In the two decades following the founding of the N.H. Archaeological Society in 1947, there were limited, but professional, surveys done in Stratham by volunteers. The 1970s saw the involvement of professionals, headed by the State Archaeologist, who conducted walk-over surveys with some test pitting to verify site locations. The results of these surveys are held at the N.H. Division of Historical Resources. In 1992 the Stratham Historical Society initiated a professional archaeological dig, led by Gary Hume, State Archaeologist. A three-year project, the dig focused on a 17th-century home site at Sandy Point.

Presently there are professional archaeological projects in many of the towns surrounding the Great Bay. The relatively intact sites in Stratham have the potential to provide important artifacts and information to this regional effort.

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

Authorized under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the National Register of Historic Places is the nation’s official list of historical resources worthy of preservation and protection. Properties listed in the National Register are extensively researched to determine eligibility, reviewed by the New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources, and receive final approval from the National Park Service.

To date, four Stratham properties listed in the National Register are the George A. and Emma B. Wiggin Memorial Library (now the Stratham Historical Society, Portsmouth Avenue); the Samuel Lane House (also known as Jabez Lane House, Portsmouth Avenue at the traffic circle); Kenniston Tavern (also known as Ephraim Crockett House, 245 Portsmouth Avenue); Cornet Thomas Wiggin House (also known as the Tannery and Widow Sarah Wiggin House, 249 Portsmouth Avenue).

Five Stratham properties that were researched and determined to be eligible for the National Register are Stuart Farm (73 College Road), Bunker Hill Orchards (97 Bunker Hill Avenue), 33 Bunker Hill Avenue, 45 Fryng Pan

Lane, and Scamman Farm (69 Portsmouth Avenue). As more sites are researched and inventoried, it is likely that the number of properties listed or determined to be eligible for listing in the National Register will increase.

SURVEY OF HISTORICAL RESOURCES

In 2007 the Heritage Commission initiated a survey of historical resources, a multi-year project that will involve the Commission, the Historical Society, volunteers, and outside consultants. Using standards and forms established by the New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources, the survey will prepare descriptive inventories of historical resources over 50 years old. Resources inventoried will include not only buildings but also sites and built landscape features of historic significance. At the end of the process Stratham will have physical files (to be stored at the Historical Society) with folders of research on each resource, and a publicly accessible digital database. In addition, each resource will be plotted on the current town map, just as many natural resources are already mapped.

Conditional upon funding, the survey process will also result in a professionally prepared profile and assessment (known as a Town-wide Area Form) that examines the history and architecture of the entire town, and describes the various historic contexts that define the town and the range of resources associated with each historic period and context.

The documentation included in the inventory and the Area Form will provide to the Planning Board or other interested parties a means to understand the broad patterns of history and development that are reflected in Stratham's built environment. That level of understanding can lead to better-informed decisions and to more effective preservation planning.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

Sources used to prepare the Historical Resources section of the Master Plan include the Stratham Master Plans of 1985 and 1998; the master plans of Exeter and Peterborough; Preserving Community Character: A Preservation Planning Handbook for New Hampshire (New Hampshire Preservation Alliance, 2006); Stratham Historical Society, Inc. pamphlet with reference History of Stratham, New Hampshire, Charles B. Nelson; New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources/Project Area Form (Pipeline), May 1998, Lynne Emerson Monroe.

GOALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

HISTORIC AND ARCHEOLOGICAL RESOURCES

The historic and archeological buildings and sites in Stratham contribute to the town's unique heritage, and thus it is in the public interest to protect them. It is the policy of the Town of Stratham to protect these historic and archeological resources through both voluntary measures and regulatory powers.

GOAL: Make historic preservation part of the planning process.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Planning Board should keep the Heritage Commission informed of its agendas.

The Heritage Commission should advise and provide information to the Planning Board and the Zoning Board of Adjustment to facilitate historic preservation. This is particularly encouraged in cases involving properties more than 50 years old or which may have some impact upon a historic site or resource, including those properties listed or eligible for listing in the National Register or appearing on the 1985 Stratham Historical Society map.

Survey of Historical Resources – Following the spirit of recommendation 6.1 (p.7-34) of the 1998 Master Plan, the Heritage Commission should continue the inventory of structures and sites more than 50 years old. As a resource to the town, the survey should result in a summary of the historical resources, architectural styles and patterns of development that characterize Stratham. The scope of this project is outlined in Section xx of this Master Plan. Upon completion the survey should be adopted as part of the Master Plan.

The Planning Board should organize at least one meeting per year of all the town commissions and boards to encourage the exchange of information and ideas and the development of common goals.

In order to preserve community character and foster growth with an appropriate sense of place, the Planning Board should encourage building and landscape design and materials based on local and regional styles and practice.

Subdivision and site plan review should include the identification of historic and archaeological features, neighborhoods, and views.

The naming of new roads should consider any historic features or names of the area.

The Heritage Commission should be included in the review of development plans for town-owned buildings.

The Planning Board should adopt building codes, such as the International Building Code 2000, which allow flexibility for historic buildings. The Heritage Commission should advise in determining whether a building might be exempt from otherwise mandatory code provisions.

GOAL: Recognize and work to preserve civic structures more than 50 years old, including those that are no longer owned by the town.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Heritage Commission should make these structures a priority as it proceeds with the survey of historical resources. The structures include the former Town Hall and the remaining former schools: the Ridge, Stratham Hill, Winnicott and Plains schools.

George A. and Emma B. Wiggin Memorial Library Building: The Historical Society, working with relevant town entities, should continue to give high priority to making the lower level suitable for storage.

GOAL: Use both voluntary measures and regulatory powers to ensure that known and undiscovered archeological sites are not accidentally disturbed or destroyed.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Heritage Commission should work with the office of the State Archeologist to make sure that there is an accessible list of both known and likely archeological sites in Stratham.

The Planning Board should develop provisions in the subdivision and site plan regulations applicable to developments proposed in known or likely archeological sites. These provisions should include notification of the State Archeologist and permission to conduct a timely reconnaissance of sites prior to excavation.

The Town should include rights for archeological investigation in any conservation easement it obtains on lands where there is reason to suspect the presence of an archeological site.

GOAL: Recognize Stratham's agricultural heritage and potential through preserving farms and farm structures and by promoting agriculture in Stratham.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Heritage Commission should make farms and farm structures a priority in the survey of historical structures.

The Planning Board should review current zoning to ensure that Stratham is a farm-friendly community. In this effort, it may consult with the local farm community as well as with organizations such as the NH Coalition for Sustaining Agriculture and UNH Cooperative Extension.

The Planning Board should form a committee drawn from the town's farming community and interested citizens to advise how best to ensure the future of agriculture in Stratham.

The Heritage Commission and the Ad Hoc Conservation Bond Subcommittee should work together to encourage the conservation of the lands that provide the vital historical context for many of Stratham's farms, the setting for many significant farm structures.

GOAL: Foster increased awareness, appreciation of and access to the history of Stratham and its historic and archeological assets.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Stratham Tercentenary: In March 2016, Stratham will celebrate the 300th anniversary of its incorporation. The Selectmen should appoint a committee to organize the commemoration and celebration of the anniversary. The committee should be widely representative of the town and should include representatives of the Historical Society, the Heritage Commission, and the Recreation Commission.

Collaboration with schools: The Historical Society should strengthen and broaden its connection to the schools. Its programs with the elementary school should be periodically reviewed and the society should develop exhibits that are of interest to children and relevant to the curriculum. Building on the Society's current promotion of its programs, the Society should develop greater interaction with teachers and students at both the middle school and high school

Stratham history on the town website:

The Planning Board, Heritage Commissions and all other relevant boards and commissions should cooperate to develop and maintain a town website. The Heritage Commission's survey of historical resources will provide the starting point for access to research on historic sites and structures in Stratham.

The Historical Society should seek means to make its holdings more accessible through its website with the goal of linking to the Town website. In the near term, genealogical materials will have the highest priority. For internal use, the Society intends to develop procedures to use its computer and software to record and search accession records.

NOTE ON SOURCES USED TO PREPARE MAP AND TABLE OF HISTORICAL RESOURCES

Unless otherwise noted the descriptive notes presented in the table are those that appeared in the 1997 Master Plan.

(1793) refers to Phinehas Merrill map of 1793

(SHS 1985) refers to the Stratham Historical Society map and list of 1985

(SHS 2001) refers to the Stratham Historical Society list of properties on the Phinehas Merrill map of 1793 still standing in 2001

(T.A.) refers to records of the town assessor

(RCP 1997) refers to the map and table prepared by the Rockingham Planning Commission for the Master Plan, 1997

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