

## INTRODUCTION

The Topsham Design Review Manual has been developed in order to provide guidance to the Town of Topsham, the Historic District Commission, property owners, builders, and anyone who may be involved with working on or living in a historic property in one of Topsham's five local historic districts. The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties (1995) are the basis for Topsham's guidelines.

The intention of this review manual is to elaborate upon the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and serve as a reference and a tool both for reviewing applications and to assist property owners in advance of submitting a Certificate of Appropriateness application to the Historic District Commission. This Design Review Manual provides guidance about what defines the character of Topsham's historic districts and reinforces the principals behind why local historic districts are important.

This Design Review Manual is also intended to raise awareness among property owners about the informational resources and the economic choices that are available to them. In many cases, an applicant may not be aware of the resources and options that are available to them as a property owner.

For example, a property owner may present an application for replacing their 100 year old windows with vinyl windows because the old windows are "drafty and rattle" without fully understanding all the options they have for repairing the existing windows. In many cases, wood windows are in excellent shape and the addition of weather-stripping and interior or exterior storms may solve their problems for substantially less money.

### Overview of Topsham's History

Situated along the banks of the Androscoggin River, the Town of Topsham was settled in 1717, but not incorporated until 1764. The early development of Topsham, along with nearby Brunswick and Harpswell, was tied to the land and water: farming, fishing, fur trading, lumber and shipbuilding. In the early 1700s, merchants were funding the construction of sea going vessels to send goods down to Boston and, in some cases, directly out to the West Indies trade routes.

In 1753, the first of several dams was built to harness the power of the mighty Androscoggin River.

Topsham's population grew during the mid-1700s and the town began to thrive as saw mills and lumber manufacturing sprang up along the Androscoggin River. Saw mills and lumber manufacturing made Topsham one of the busiest commercial areas west of Bath during the early 1800s. Several other industries developed in the area including a watch factory, tanneries, marble works, nail factory, pitchfork factory, tobacco manufacture and feldspar mining.

During the nineteenth century, Topsham's economy and occupations became increasingly tied to industry and not farming. This resulted in the development of a residential area near the village, as people wanted to be closer to their place of work.

A great deal of the town's history is tied to the mills. The Pejepscot Paper Mill was constructed in 1868 and for over 100 years was one of the largest businesses and employers in the Topsham area.

The Mill, which partially burned in 1998, was the first in Maine to produce paper from wood pulp. The rock formations in the river made an excellent location for a mill because a relatively short dam was required to harness the river. Over the years, several companies were formed and affiliated with the Pejepscot Mill including the Bowdoin Manufacturing Company, Lisbon Falls Fiber, Bay Shore Lumber and Sagadahoc Towing Company. In 1915, all of these enterprises were combined under the umbrella of the Pejepscot Paper Company.

The mill was completely closed in the mid-1980s and attempts were made to find a new use for the extensive mill complex. In an attempt to save the mill, a new use had been approved for the complex, which involved demolishing part of the complex. In November 1998, during the demolition and salvage period a fire broke out. After the fire, several of the mill buildings that survived were adapted to a new use and others were demolished.

Another important aspect of the town's history, is the Topsham Fair. Organized by the Sagadahoc Agricultural and Horticultural Society, the first fair was held in 1855 and was a great success. For over 145 years, the Topsham Fair has been a major event for the town and it still is today. The Topsham Fair

Grandstand was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1991 and represents an important element of the town's history.

The Topsham and Brunswick area was also home to one of Maine's leading builders during the early decades of the nineteenth century, Samuel Melcher III (1775 – 1862). Like many other builders of the day, Melcher had no formal training in architecture, but learned from pattern books and his father who was also a builder.

The majority of Melcher's work was in the Federal style, however, he did utilize Greek and Gothic elements later in his career. Remarkably, seven of Melcher's eight commissions in Topsham survive. He worked with his brother Aaron on the Porter House (26 Elm Street) and the Walker House (Melcher Place). The other extant buildings in Topsham by Melcher include the Daniel Holden House (24 Elm Street), the Harris Sanford House (6 Elm Street), the Nahum Perkins House (16 Elm Street), the Samuel Veazie House (41 Main Street), and the Baptist Church on Elm Street.

Note: The information in this section was compiled from the following resources:

Beard, Frank A. and Bette A. Smith. *Maine's Historic Places*. Camden, Maine: Down East Books, 1982.

Wheeler, George Augustus and Henry Warren Wheeler. *History of Brunswick, Topsham, and Harpswell, Maine*. Boston: Alfred Mudge & Son, 1878.

*Topsham, Maine: 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Bicentennial Booklet*. Topsham, Maine: 1964.

Shettleworth, Earle G., ed. "Samuel Melcher III." *A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine* Vol. V, No. 13 (1988), Augusta, Maine: Maine Historic Preservation Commission.

## THE HISTORIC DISTRICTS OF TOPSHAM

In 1977, the first historic district was created in Topsham and it was a National Register Historic District which included one or both sides of the following streets: Elm, Perkins, Pleasant, Melcher, Green, Town Landing, and Main. Listing on the National Register of Historic Places is an honor and recognizes “sites, buildings, objects, districts and structures that are significant in American history, architecture, archaeology and culture.” These can be significant on a local, state or national level.

National Register designation is a limited preservation tool, because it does not protect a building from being dramatically altered or torn down. However, listing on the National Register does trigger a review process when a project that a federal agency finances, permits or owns impacts a property that is listed in the register **or eligible** for listing.

For example, if a town is widening a road and the project is funded, in part, with federal funds, and the widening project threatens a property listed on the National Register then the review process would be required. The Section 106 review process, as it is called, would review the impact of the widening project on the historic property and determine whether there is an alternative to disturbing the historic property.

Town leaders and residents decided that an improved mechanism for preserving the irreplaceable history and character of the town was needed. In 1988, historic district regulations were established and the process of creating local historic districts was launched. Over the course of several years five local historic districts were created.

Initially, one large local historic district was proposed which included the area of the National Register district as well as additional areas. This initial proposal was not successful. A revised proposal using *only* the National Register District boundaries was presented and approved. Over time, smaller districts were proposed and approved.

Although there are five districts, there is a consistency of building type, materials and architectural styles throughout all of them. The five districts in Topsham cover an area in the village that is comprised of predominantly residential structures and a few small commercial buildings representing 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century

architecture and one of the premier examples of Industrial architecture in Maine, the Pejepscot Mill. The following local districts exist in Topsham: the National Register Historic District, the South Elm Street, Great Mill Island, Lower Main Street and Lower Winter Street districts.

The few surviving Colonial era houses in Topsham are typically one-and-a-half story capes with a center chimney. These structures reflect the early settlement of the area when farming was the dominant way of life. Originally on large tracts of land, many of these buildings are oriented towards the Adroscoggin River which was becoming an increasingly important agent for economic growth and change.

As the economy shifted away from farming and towards trade and manufacturing, the village center became a more desirable place to live. Merchants constructed larger two-story houses in the village to be in closer proximity to their place of business which was often tied to the river (trade, merchants, shipping, manufacturing).

The construction of a house in the popular architectural style of the period was a reflection of a merchant’s success. Thus as Maine prospered, Federal style houses began appearing in Topsham and other coastal communities throughout Maine. These structures reflect the development and prosperity of Topsham during the early decades of the 1800s when the town was the busiest commercial area west of Bath.

Merchants often hired local builders like Samuel Melcher to design and construct their house in the popular style of the day. Builders in Topsham created a consistent yet simple representation of architectural styles, particularly the Federal period. Pattern books provided guidance about overall proportion, floor plan and architectural details (columns, molding profiles, windows, etc).

The Federal houses in Topsham do not represent the highest style of the form. To be more precise, they illustrate how effectively builders used pattern books to construct houses that incorporated all the vocabulary of a Federal style house: two or three story, symmetrical façade, side gable roof, centered main entry door with fanlight and flanked by sidelights, delicate window muntins, and three-part windows centered over the second story.

The historic districts in Topsham also have a large concentration of Greek Revival structures. By the time

Maine achieved statehood in 1820, the Greek Revival style had begun to establish itself as the popular style. America was celebrating her success as a new nation and it seemed appropriate to borrow architectural inspiration from the ancient Greeks whose political systems had inspired this country's leaders. As Topsham flourished with the continued success of manufacturing and the mills, the village continued to grow and Greek Revival style houses began to appear on smaller lots throughout town.

Almost all the Greek Revival structures in Topsham are situated with the gable end facing the street. This was a significant shift from the Federal style where the long façade faced the street. Some architectural historians speculate that the end gable configuration was better suited to the longer and narrower lots in towns and urban areas.

It is clear that some Topsham residences were stylistically updated, for example one Federal style house on Elm Street had an Italianate porch pediment added over the doorway. Stylistic changes may be evident in any number of areas such as the addition of porch pediments, windows with different muntin configurations or a change in the cornice board.

Scattered throughout the current districts are examples of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture. The lack of a larger concentration of architecture from these time periods reflects to a certain degree the modest level of economic growth in the area during these decades. It also may reflect that the area was largely developed to its potential.

The other styles represented in the districts include Queen Anne, Italianate and Colonial Revival. In many cases, these properties are not high style examples but vernacular buildings that borrow elements from the vocabulary of a particular style or several styles.

Many coastal communities in Maine saw the development of a new industry during the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: vacation destination. This prompted a lot of residential building in styles such as Shingle Style and Queen Anne. However, Topsham's location is just far enough inland that it did not experience this building explosion.

The following is a brief discussion of the overall context and characteristics of each district.

## A. National Register Historic District

With over 50 structures, the National Register District is the largest of the districts. The district includes buildings on Perkins, Pleasant, Melcher, Green, a section of the east side of Main Street and sections of Elm Street. The majority of the buildings are Federal and Greek Revival. Other styles represented in the district include Colonial, Colonial Revival and vernacular houses that have elements of Queen Anne and Italianate.



This house is a good example of a building that borrows elements from more than one architectural style. The wrap-around porch, porch columns and brackets suggest a Queen Anne influence yet the paired brackets along the cornice are an Italianate detail.

There are a few Federal houses in the National Register district which retain architectural detailing that may have been drawn from a pattern book such as the first edition of *The American Builder's Companion* by Asher Benjamin published in 1806.

On the north side of Elm Street, a few elaborately detailed Federal houses are situated majestically at the top of rolling landscapes that lead down to the street. Several houses on Green Street are also situated up high on a bluff and terraces. Such prominent locations afforded a view of the river and reflect the status of the property owners who were some of Topsham's most successful business leaders in the 1800s.

Other Federal houses in the district are located close to the road. The houses on Elm Street east of Town Hall maintain a fairly consistent setback from the street. There is variation in the building set back and orientation on the smaller side streets. The spacing between structures varies greatly throughout the district.

Trees are an important character defining feature of this district, particularly along Elm Street. Various objects or features define the transition from public space (the street) to private space (front entryway): the curb, trees, sidewalk, fence and/or hedge and porch. Historic photographs show mature trees lining both sides of Elm Street creating a canopy over the road. Although many of these trees have been lost, there are enough mature and young trees to maintain the essence of this significant streetscape feature.

Fences are another important character defining element of the streetscape. Several wood fences exist in the district. Front yard fencing has a dramatic impact on the streetscape and further defines the space between public and private.

Regardless of style, most of the buildings in this district have a rear ell and a connected outbuilding. In some cases, there is a free-standing outbuilding in the rear yard.

#### **B. South Elm Street Historic District**

The South Elm Street Historic District consists of the buildings located on the south side of Elm Street east of Pleasant Street. The majority of these structures are Greek Revival with the exception of a few houses that have Queen Anne, Italianate or Colonial Revival details. The majority of the houses are situated with the gable end facing the street.

Once again, almost all of the buildings have a rear ell that connects to a barn or garage and there is slight variation in the setback from the street. Trees and fencing are also important streetscape characteristics in this district.

#### **C. Great Mill Island Historic District**

The Great Mill Island District is the one district that differs dramatically from the others for several reasons. Physically the district is located on an island and the structures in the district represent a different building form and configuration.

The original 1868 brick mill building of the Pejepscot Paper Company still survives with its distinctive modified gambrel roof line. This building is one of the most significant reminders of Maine's industrial past and is one of Maine's finest examples of industrial

architecture. The design and detail evident on the large brick mill building speaks to the importance and prominence of the building. In contrast, the two additional buildings in the district are wood frame and yet are impressive in their own right.

Prior to the loss of the wooden mill buildings to the north and west of the original brick mill building, the island had an entirely different scale. The close proximity of the buildings created spaces between the buildings for pathways and roadways. The mill complex was like a small village.

#### **D. Lower Main Street Historic District**

The Lower Main Street District consists of a mix of building styles including Federal, Greek Revival and several vernacular wood frame buildings. Since lower Main Street is closest to the mill complex and the bridge it is logical that this area developed as the village commercial area. This district does include one brick building, which is an excellent example of the Greek Revival style and was originally constructed for use as a bank.

This is the one district where there is a concentration of commercial use on the first floor with residential space in the second floor. The storefronts have been greatly modified over the years and in the case of certain buildings, may not have originally been used as a store.

The building orientation is a mix of gable end and side gable facing the street. The buildings are all situated close to the road with a fairly consistent set back. Unlike the National Register and South Elm Street Districts, trees are not a character defining element of the streetscape in the Lower Main Street district. The space between public and private is much smaller in this district and is defined by the sidewalk and the building's façade.

#### **E. Lower Winter Street Historic District**

A mix of architectural styles is also evident in the Lower Winter Street Historic District, which is the smallest district in terms of the number of buildings. Colonial, Federal, and Greek Revival style buildings are represented in this district. Many of the structures are oriented with their side gable facing the street. However, the early development of the area is reflected

in the orientation of several houses where the dominant façade faces the river not the street. Once again, this reflects the dominance of the river in the history of Topsham.

In summary, the Town of Topsham designates historic properties, landmarks or districts that reflect elements of Topsham's cultural, social, economic, political, archaeological and architectural history. The districts include one religious structure and a former school building, which now serve as the Town Offices. Although there are five different districts, there is a consistency of form, scale, and building type throughout all five areas.

## WHY HISTORIC PRESERVATION AND LOCAL HISTORIC DISTRICTS?

The intention of historic preservation is not to stagnate a community in the past, but rather to preserve a town's character and guide future growth in a manner that does not destroy those very elements of a community that define how a place came to be what it is today. Preservation balances the history of a place, which is reflected in the built environment, with progress and change.

Historic district ordinances in conjunction with local zoning provide a tool enabling a community to preserve the character of the town and its quality of life. Without this type of local protection, a town's character may be eroded to the degree that it loses those features that distinguish it from other communities and define its history.

Historic district ordinances in conjunction with other planning tools are effective ways to stimulate economic development and plan for sensible future growth. Historic districts are comprised of more than just the buildings. Sidewalks, driveways, street lighting, fences and trees all contribute to the character of a village.

Typically, an inventory of buildings in a historic district is produced. This inventory contains an overall history of the area and a description of each building, its history and its significance. Buildings are assigned to categories in terms of their architectural integrity and historic context, such as significant, contributing and non-contributing. This type of information is helpful in evaluating applications and in planning for future growth or additional districts.

### Tax Incentives

One of the benefits to local historic districts is that not only significant **but also contributing** structures within a historic district may be eligible for tax credits. The Federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentives program rewards private investment in rehabilitating historic properties for use as offices, rental housing, and retail stores.

Current tax incentives include a 20% tax credit for the certified rehabilitation of a certified historic structure and a 10% tax credit for the rehabilitation of non-historic, non-residential buildings built before 1936.

Additionally, a Maine State taxpayer is allowed a credit equal to the amount of the Federal credit claimed by the taxpayer under section 47 of the Internal Revenue Code for rehabilitation of certified historic structures located in Maine. Neither tax credit is available for properties used exclusively as the owner's private residence. For additional information about these programs, contact the Maine Historic Preservation Commission in Augusta. (See References section in the Appendix for contact information.)

In November 1999, Maine residents voted to amend the state constitution to allow the Legislature to enact enabling legislation authoring local option property tax reductions for the maintenance of historic and scenic properties. On April 6, 2000, the Governor signed the bill into law. It will be up to each municipality to implement this tax incentive program. This is potentially a powerful economic and planning tool for historic preservation and local historic districts.

### Benefits of Historic Preservation and Local Districts

Historic preservation has proven to be a tool that benefits communities in many ways:

- increases property values
- revives neighborhoods that had been deteriorating
- enhances the quality of life and sense of neighborhood
- increases property sales and tax revenues
- creates new jobs and benefits local suppliers
- heritage tourism, one of Maine's key industries, relies on the history and character of small towns and villages
- preservation is good for the environment: preserving buildings reduces the amount of building waste that goes into landfills

Historic properties and village centers are the backbone of that which makes our neighborhoods and villages attractive to tourism. Local historic districts protect the investments of owners and residents because owners know that those characteristics of a particular area that make it an enjoyable place to live will be maintained.

Historic districts enhance a town's quality of life and this can boost business recruitment potential. Attractive neighborhoods and vibrant town centers attract new businesses and quality industry. Businesses want to offer their employees the incentive of a great quality of life.

## THE REVIEW PROCESS

Chapter 225-18 of the Topsham Code establishes a review process for any exterior alteration, new construction, or demolition proposed for a property located within Topsham's historic districts. The Topsham Historic District Commission reviews applications and acts as the steward for the town's historic districts. The commission meets monthly to review applications and the public is invited to attend these meetings. The Topsham Department of Planning can provide information about the schedule of meetings for the commission.

Ordinary maintenance or repair of any exterior feature **that does not involve a change in the design, material or appearance** does not require a Certificate of Appropriateness. For example, repainting the exterior of a house the same color or repairing a wooden door with the same materials would not require a certificate.

When a property owner has plans for making an alteration to the exterior of the property, an application for a Certificate of Appropriateness must be obtained from the Town of Topsham Department of Planning. Once completed, the property owner submits the Certificate to the Town Planner who then forwards the application to the Historic District Commission (HDC) for review.

The HDC will review an application within forty-five (45) days of receiving a completed application. The HDC meets the second Wednesday of the month to discuss pending applications and will take one of three actions:

- approve the application as it is submitted
- approve the application with conditions or
- deny the application

After the HDC acts on the application, it is then forwarded to the Code Enforcement Officer who will then issue or deny permits, as appropriate.

An application must include the following:

- Applicant's name, address and interest in the property
- Owner's name and address, if different from applicant's
- Address or location of the property
- Current use and zoning classification of the property

- Brief description of the proposed work on the property
- Drawing or drawings indicating the following:
  - design
  - texture
  - color of brick or shingles
  - location of any proposed alteration or new construction
- Drawings = Plans and exterior elevations drawn to scale with sufficient detail to show exterior appearances as they relate to the architectural design of the building(s). Materials and textures should be reflected and/or noted on the drawings.
- Photographs of the building involved and adjacent buildings
- Site plan indicating any proposed changes involving walls, walks, fences, accessory buildings, signs and outdoor light fixtures [The commission may waive the requirement for a site plan if the changes proposed do not involve such features.]

Detail drawings such as muntin profiles, joints and column connections provide valuable information about the proposed project and should be included where appropriate to the application. An incomplete application will delay the review process for a certificate of appropriateness. If there is any question as to the extent of drawings and details needed, then the applicant should contact the Topsham Department of Planning Office to verify what will be necessary.

No building or other type of permit shall be issued for a property in a historic district until the HDC has reviewed and approved a Certificate of Appropriateness application.



One of the many Federal style houses in Topsham.

