2010 Topsham, Maine
Historic Resources Survey

Report and Resource Inventory List

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The 2009-2010 Topsham Historic Resources Survey has documented 248 resources within the Topsham village area. This includes 157 Contributing Buildings and 76 Non-Contributing Buildings; 5 Contributing Structures and 1 Non-Contributing structure; and 1 Contributing Site and 1 Non-Contributing Site. The survey counted all buildings, including separate carriage houses, barns, garages and sheds. If these secondary buildings are subtracted from the totals, there are 140 Contributing Buildings and 45 Non-Contributing Buildings. Structures include bridges, a historic granite culvert, a historic mill race channel, and mill foundation ruins on the Mill Island. Sites include an historic cemetery and a modern parking lot.

The areas surveyed included all areas within the village with contiguous concentrations of buildings related in character, use, or age. The boundaries of the survey area were determined using the criteria of the Maine Historic Preservation Commission, to insure that significant resources were not randomly excluded when adjacent to other significant resources. There are pockets within the surveyed area where the concentration of non-contributing resources is such that any new or adjusted historic district boundaries would likely not include those resources.

The period of significance used to determine designation status (contributing or non-contributing) was 1784 to 1932. 1784 is the date of the oldest building in the village and 1932 is the year that the Frank Wood Bridge was built and Main Street was realigned off the Mill Island – causing the last major reorientation of the village street pattern in the historic period (at least 50 years before present). 1932 is also an appropriate date to conclude the period of significance because very little new construction happened for a number of years after that date, due to the Great Depression and the material and labor shortages of World War II. The residential development that resumed after WWII was of a distinctly different scale and character from the buildings built before the Great Depression. If one considers houses built in Topsham village from 1784 to the present, there is a clear and obvious break at that point in the common design characteristics that were largely continuous up until that time. Throughout the period of significance, there was a continuing pattern of development, with commercial uses concentrated along Main Street between Elm Street and the Mill Island, Industrial uses concentrated on the island and along the Granny Hole Stream mill race channel, and residential development in the remainder of the area. In the residential areas, there was a consistent pattern of the earliest buildings being spread some distance apart, with in-fill development increasing the density along the streets as time passed.

Development of Topsham Village

The earliest permanent European settlement of Topsham began in 1717 with homesteads built on 100 acre lots fronting on the Androscoggin River, with most homes several miles east of where the village eventually developed. The first saw mills were built on the Cathance River, which was undoubtedly far easier to dam and control with the available manpower and technology than the Androscoggin River at the falls. By 1753 the first wooden dam across the Androscoggin was constructed. Other dams followed in 1756, 1760, and 1772. In 1772 there were mills on the Topsham side of the upper and middle dams.

The bridge to Great Mill Island was built in 1795 and the Androscoggin was first bridged between Topsham and Brunswick in 1796. Mills were established at Granny Hole Stream around the same time. This early development of water power on the Topsham side of the river involved the very clever use of a
natural seasonal watercourse, Granny Hole Stream, and a wooden dam at the lowest level of the Androscoggin falls, to create a mill race. The dam raised the level of the water in the river high enough to cause it to flow “backward” up the stream bed and through an outlet at the north end of Mill Island. The earliest mills on the Topsham side of the falls developed here, around Granny Hole Stream. The mills that were built here over the next several decades included saw mills, a grist mill, a woolen mill, a shutter mill, and a paper mill. It was likely the combination of these events that lead to the growth of the principal village of the town where it is located. An 1802 map shows 46 buildings within the village, 28 residences, 5 mills, 6 stores, a cabinet maker’s shop, a blacksmith shop, a pump & block makers shop, a hatter, a potter, and two tailors, along with the Court House, and school.

Elm/Winter Street (then called High Street) ran east to west as a continuation of the main road between Bowdoinham and Lisbon, built 1761-62. Main Street was built in 1790, running from the ferry (and later the bridge) to Brunswick toward Bowdoin and Augusta. Water (now Green) Street (1799) ran from the island up to Elm, east of the intersection of Elm and Main. Thompson’s Lane ran between Main and Green Streets (1798). These were the streets of the village in 1802.

The mills were centered around Granny Hole Stream, on Main Street as it crossed onto the island toward the bridge to Brunswick. Most of the stores were concentrated near the intersection of Elm and Main Streets. The school was close to the intersection of Green and Elm and the Courthouse was further east on Elm. Residences were clustered around the intersections of Elm and Main and along Green Street. Further to the east and west on Elm and Winter Streets, a few residences were spread further apart. As yet, no churches had been built within the village area, the First Parish Meetinghouse still being located out near the Cathance River settlement area.

A number of the residential buildings shown on the 1802 map are still in existence, including the Dr. Benjamin Porter House and the Hugh Wilson House. Neither the school or the Courthouse, nor any of the mills, exist today.

“The decade from 1798 to 1808… was the most prosperous up to that time and for many years thereafter.” This prosperity was due to a great extent due to the role as neutral carrier that the United States played during the Napoleonic Wars. By this time shipping, and ship building had become a flourishing business in the area, creating wealth and the need for farms to sustain the urban population which had reached 1,000 by around 1802. Population continued to grow, until by 1850 there were 2,010 residents; a figure which would not be reached again until nearly a century later (from a series of articles on the early history of Topsham by Mary Pelham Hill, 1924).

During this period we see the first signs of a clear separation of the houses of the wealthy from those of more modest means, with large mansions set on high ground well back from the north side of the street and smaller capes built level with, and close to, the street on the south side. The natural land forms of the village area provided a number of sites suitable for the Federal style ideal of a grand residence placed on an elevated terrace. In communities with a flatter natural landscape, vast amounts of fill were often moved and built up around the high foundations of new Federal style mansions to create this effect.

The next map located is from 1828, by which time several streets had been added to the village map, Pleasant Street as far as Union Street (now Melcher Place) and Summer Street being the two principal
additions. The numbers of both mills and residences had increased substantially. The mills now spread well onto the mill island, utilizing power from the several dams across the Androscoggin. Many more residences had been built along Elm Street, filling in between the earlier scattered homes, and now also being built on the lower ground along the south side of the street. A new Meeting House had been built in the village in 1821, next to the Court House.

In the decade following the publication of this map, the Baptist Church on Elm Street was constructed by Samuel Melcher III (1835), and the new Congregational Church, a block east on the corner of Green Street, was built by Melcher the following year. In 1837 the Free Will Baptist Church was built on the south side of Winter Street, halfway up the hill. A one-room schoolhouse was built beside the church. Between 1828 and the next detailed map, in 1853, the central village continued to grow and increase in density, having more than 150 buildings of all sizes. A number of large but not grand residences were built during this time, as the Federal style was transitioning to the new Greek Revival style. Several of these appear to be earlier Federal style capes that had a second story added and their exteriors remodeled in the Greek Revival style. At the same time, smaller late Federal style and Greek Revival capes were built on the south side of Elm Street and along Pleasant Street.

The Brunswick-Topsham bird’s eye view published in 1877 shows the village south of Melcher Place largely as it exists today. There are approximately 180 buildings shown, including the three churches mentioned above. Notable new additions to the village are the brick Bowdoin Paper Co. mill (by far the largest building in town), the railroad depot at the east end of the village, and the Topsham Fair grandstand building. Most of the buildings shown in the bird’s eye view can easily be identified today.

New residential construction continued during the mid and late Victorian era; Summer Street saw several houses built or remodeled in the Queen Anne style, the area between the village cemetery (laid out in 1818) and Green Street was filled in with several new homes and many older houses were remodeled with Italianate style door hoods, bay windows, and porches. Development also moved northward on Main Street with vernacular Victorian houses appearing beyond Wilson Street.

Following the construction of the brick paper mill in 1868, the character of the mill island became significantly more “industrial”. The building was a great change from the earlier wood-framed mill buildings along Granny Hole Stream. As the Bowdoin Mill grew, it built a row of large wood-framed support buildings across Main Street, leaving Main Street, the major artery in and out of Topsham from Brunswick, to pass through their “mill yard”. In spite of this shift to a much more massive industrial character, several houses on the island remained in residential use well into the 20th century.

In the first decades of the 20th century the residential development of the village continued, with some infill development along Elm and Green streets, some of it apparently replacing burned homes, and significant new development along Main Street above Melcher Place. The construction of the Brunswick and Topsham Electric Railway in 1897, which was merged with other trolley lines and extended to Lewiston several years later, almost certainly fueled this development. The line that passed along Main Street provided regular service from Lewiston to Bath, passing through Brunswick. A significant number of these early 20th century Colonial Revival capes and American Four Square style homes appear to be mail-order kit homes, like those sold by Aladdin Homes and Sears, Roebuck & Co. A number of them still have the small hip-roofed garages that could be ordered with the houses.
The last major development defining the character of Topsham village prior to World War II was the construction of the Frank Wood Bridge in 1932. Since 1796 a series of bridges between Topsham and Brunswick had landed on the mill island. Main Street then came across the mill island, crossed a short bridge over Granny Hole Stream at the north end of the island, and formed a Y intersection with the foot of Green Street. From here Main Street turned slightly to the west and passed up the hill past the Bank Building and the other buildings of “downtown”. Summer Street intersected Main Street just above the Green Street intersection. The Frank Wood Bridge was built upstream of the old location and Main Street was shifted to the west to align with the new bridge, removing the through traffic from the mill island. The old bridge from the foot of Green Street to the island remained (it is still there, although currently in the process of being removed) but it was now used solely for access to the island. This change significantly altered the experience of passing between Topsham and Brunswick, as one no longer passed through the mill yard of an large paper company. Although there have been more recent changes to Main Street (most significantly the relocation of the intersection of Summer and Main streets), the development basic street layout of the lower village was finalized in 1932.

Character of the Area Surveyed

The survey area is characterized by a mixture of substantial and modest early houses with a smaller number of later in-fill development in the majority of the area. Along the upper portion of Main Street there is a significant concentration of early 20th century residential development, with a smaller number of older buildings remaining. Upper Pleasant Street has the only concentration of post-WWII houses in the area, primarily concentrated on the west side of the street. Commercial buildings are concentrated on Main Street below the intersection of Elm and Winter streets, as they have always been. Overall, the buildings in the survey area retain a high degree of architectural integrity, with a few buildings on the edge of “non-contributing”. Only a few historic buildings have been determined to be non-contributing due to loss of architectural integrity. The majority of resources determined to be non-contributing have been given that designation due to their being built after the end of the period of significant (1784-1932). Although there are buildings that have been sided with vinyl or aluminum in recent decades, for the most part it has been carefully applied and character defining trim preserved. It is likely that the original clapboards or shingles remain in place behind the siding on most of these buildings.

In summary, the area surveyed represents a remarkably intact New England village demonstrating a continuous pattern of related development that was sustained over a period of nearly 150 years. The architectural styles of several periods represented share an architectural vocabulary that allows them to be seen as a unified whole while also being distinct enough to allow the history of development to be clearly “read” by a careful observer today.