

The Bolton Preservation Plan

Executive Summary

This preservation plan has been prepared to assist the Town of Bolton in developing a strategy to preserve its many and varied historic resources. Bolton's historic structures and landscapes are what make it special and unique, and the preservation of the character of the town will depend in great part on the preservation of its historic places and sites. Using this strategy, the Town will be able to integrate the goals and objectives of historic preservation into its ongoing planning efforts and its initiatives to preserve the character of Bolton.

A Summary of Bolton's History

Settlement in Bolton has in great part been determined by its geology and landscape. The Nashaway tribe of Native Americans and their predecessors encamped along the Still River to take advantage of fishing sites and because the low stage deposits of Glacial Lake Nashua had left soils that were easily worked with simple stone implements but which were fertile and sufficiently moist to be productive for their main crops: corn, beans and squash. These sites---archaeological remains of which have been found along what is now Still River Road--were also in proximity to the Nashua River's fresh water marshes, which the Nashaways burned annually to retain their productivity for wildfowl. Native Americans also burned woodlands each year to facilitate travel, to improve hunting and to increase the productivity of the woodlands for wildlife and berry production. The trails that the Nashaways made in the woods later became the paths for trappers and the earliest routes of colonial roads used by the first settlers. By the time that the earliest settlement of Europeans occurred in this area, the Nashaway population had been decimated by the widespread epidemic of 1617.

Lancaster was chosen as a site for settlement by the Puritans because of the expanse of "intervale" or fresh water marsh available for winter cattle fodder and because of the low-lying, easily-worked, and productive pasture and crop land in the area, much of it already cleared by the Nashaways. King Philip's war forced the evacuation of Lancaster in 1675; however, in 1680, settlers began returning to the area permanently.

In 1738, Bolton was given the approval of the General Court to establish a separate town. In 1740, the first Bolton meetinghouse/parish was built near what is now the intersection of Wataquadock and Manor Roads. As with most New England towns, Bolton's economic base was agriculture. However, in order to supplement their income, Bolton's farmers also engaged in seasonal cottage industry occupations such as the making of shoes, boots, furniture, barrels, plows, combs, buttons, trunks, water pumps, shoe boxes, cards for textile manufacturing, beaver, silk and straw hats, potash, saddles, oxbows, whips, and harnesses. However, a few early major industries in town included quarrying and processing lime for mortar and plaster at the Whitcomb lime quarry in East Bolton and making bricks at four locations, the largest two being at the northern section of Still River Road. Several saw and grist mills also operated in the town.

The archaeological remains of old mill pond dams and mill foundations can still be found at many locations along the Great Brook and its tributaries and along Saw Mill Brook off of Forbush Mill Road. The lime kiln is still intact but no traces remain of the brick yards.

The Boston to Lancaster Road also passed through Bolton, resulting in the creation of several travel-related businesses, including several inns and taverns, harness shops and blacksmith shops that catered to travelers and the stage coach business. Bolton Center was a particularly active as a stop on the stage coach run. One of the few inns/taverns that still exist is the Wilder Mansion at 101 Wilder Road, which was in operation as an inn from 1754 to 1771. The longest-operating inn and tavern was the Abraham Holder Inn, once located at 225 Main Street, which continued from 1756 to 1844. The coming of the railroads to the area resulted in the demise of all of the town's inns.

Because Bolton had neither a major river that could be harnessed for water power nor a railroad line, the industrial revolution passed it by. As the nearby industrial centers increased their manufacturing and technological capability in the early nineteenth century, the market for the products from Bolton's cottage industries gradually disappeared and Bolton again reverted to principally an agricultural economy. The growth of nearby cities and the access to distant markets provided by the railroads beginning in the 1840's resulted in Bolton's agriculture evolving from subsistence farming to the growing of cash crops of vegetables and fruits and the production of milk, eggs, beef and pork for urban populations. Bolton's hillsides provided ideal soil and climatic conditions for growing high quality apples for the wholesale market.

The threat to Bolton's historic resources

Bolton's historic resources are of three main kinds: (1) the unique land forms remaining from the 100,000 year duration of the last ice age; (2) the settlement sites of the Nashaway tribe and their predecessors, who occupied this area for approximately 10,000 years; and (3) the 300 years of European settlement. All three of these historic resource categories are threatened by recent development patterns.

For 100 years, from the beginning of the industrial revolution to the arrival of urban sprawl, Bolton's physical landscape remained almost untouched by change. Beginning in the 1950's and accelerating to the present, however, the landscape of Bolton has seen the results of suburbanization. The opening of Route 495 in the 1960's made Bolton no longer a remote town situated between Boston and Worcester but a strategically-placed community intersected by a regional transportation corridor.

Bolton's history is closely tied to the land. Even its industries were based on raw materials taken from the local earth, harvested from its soil, or taken as byproducts from animals grown on its farms. Buildings are the core of Bolton's history, but the landscape provides the setting and context for historic structures. Without the preservation of the landscape, historic buildings and sites become occasional markers in an unrelenting sea of suburban sprawl.

Suburban development also threatens historic buildings when the escalating cost of land exceeds the value of “old” buildings on a parcel, particularly when those buildings are of modest size. In such situations, historic structures are either threatened with demolition or else enlarged or altered in a manner which destroys the historical integrity of the building.

Bolton has lost many of its historic resources, including the home of its illustrious citizen John Whitcomb, several of its inns, all of its saw mills, grist mills and blacksmith shops, several churches and countless barns. In the 1990’s, the town lost the Townsend House (1700’s), the Calvin Gates House (1810) and the Benjamin Atherton House (1720). The Atherton house, one of the town’s oldest, was demolished in 1998.

Other threats to historic resources include the decreasing viability of some forms of agriculture; the natural deterioration of old dams and the challenges in rehabilitating them; the threats to scenic roads from private development and public improvements; and a lack of awareness of historic resources. The threat to an historic resource from a lack of awareness is particularly relevant to archeological and geologic sites, where the existence of an historic resource may not be evident.

Recent public and private historic preservation initiatives

The preservation of historic resources is advanced by planning. The town has recently completed an updated Open Space and Recreation Plan that includes many recommendations that support historic preservation goals. The Conservation Commission, Historical Commission and the Bolton Conservation Trust will be coordinating the implementation of both the open space and the preservation plans. In addition, the Board of Selectmen has recently appointed a Long-Range Planning Committee. The completion of the Open Space Plan and the Preservation Plan will provide the Long-Range Planning Committee with a base of valuable information as they begin their work.

Recent historic preservation efforts initiated by the Town of Bolton include the designation in 1998 of the Bolton Center National Register Historic District; the completion of a major addition to the survey of historic properties in town, also in 1998; the preparation of this preservation plan; and repairs to the Town Hall roof. The Bolton Historical Commission applied for and received matching funding from the Survey and Planning Grant Program, administered by the Massachusetts Historical Commission, for the historic resources survey and for the preservation plan. It also applied for and received matching major funding from the Massachusetts Historical Commission from its Preservation Projects Fund Program to repair the slate roof of the Town Hall.

Other town preservation efforts have included the protection of open sites that have historical significance. Among these sites are the public acquisition of the Lime Kiln and Quarry Conservation Area in East Bolton; the Quaker Burying Ground on Berlin Road and the Powderhouse Hill Conservation Area. In addition, the town has appropriated matching funds to purchase an Agricultural Preservation Restriction on the Nashoba Winery apple orchards and recently approved zoning changes that resulted in placing conservation restrictions on the considerable acreage of the historic Schultz farm and the International Golf Course, both sites of historical significance.

Private efforts in historic preservation include the archival and educational work of the Bolton Historical Society and the open space preservation efforts of the Bolton Conservation Trust. The Bolton Conservation Trust was instrumental in securing conservation restrictions around the Whitcomb Inn, the oldest extant house in Bolton, and the purchase of the Lime Kiln and Quarry Conservation Area. As part of the purchase of the lime quarry site, the Trust secured a preservation restriction on the Moses Wilder House (ca. 1795), the only such restriction on a Bolton historic structure.

Town land use regulations that complement the goals of historic preservation include the enactment of a demolition delay bylaw; the approval of a cluster/open space zoning bylaw; the adoption of a bylaw that assists farms in remaining economically-viable; a “hammerhead lot” provision of the zoning bylaw, whose effect has been to lessen the visual impact of development on scenic roads; and provisions for site plan approval. The Town has also enacted a scenic roads bylaw and designated 42 town roads to be subject to its provisions. In addition, the Town adopted provisions of state law which allows active farm land to be assessed at its agricultural rather than development value, thereby lessening financial pressures on farmers to sell for development purposes.

Issues and needs related to historic preservation in Bolton

The process of preparing the Bolton Preservation Plan included two public forums; many interviews with public officials and townspeople active in civic affairs; review of prior planning and other relevant documents; site visits and independent research. The information derived from these forums, interviews and research has been categorized into five major areas of issues and needs related to historic preservation:

- (1) survey and planning needs;
- (2) regulatory issues and needs;
- (3) acquisition issues and needs;
- (4) town projects issues and needs; and
- (5) public awareness/advocacy issues and needs.

Survey and inventory needs identified include further updating of survey forms to bring all surveyed sites up to current standards of the Massachusetts Historical Commission and to inventory sites not yet surveyed; survey all dam, mill and other engineered sites in town; conduct a further survey of 20th Century historic resources; survey Native American settlement sites; and implement an ongoing process of updating completed survey forms. Planning needs identified included continuing the planning effort begun in this plan related to the implementation of the “historic landscapes strategy” detailed for several areas in Bolton, including planning for viewshed protection. Another identified planning need was for communication and coordination with abutting towns on protecting historic landscapes, such as the Quaker landscape that both Bolton and Berlin have in common. In addition, protection of historic sites in Bolton was believed to benefit from greater coordination and communication among town boards and private agencies that have an interest in planning, open space protection and historic preservation.

Regulatory issues and needs included revising the zoning bylaw to strengthen site plan review procedures to increase protections for historic resources and amending the subdivision regulations to allow the Planning Board greater latitude in protecting historic sites. Additional needs identified included the consideration of adding new “tools” for use by developers to give them greater flexibility in protecting historic properties (for example, the Transfer of Development Rights) and encouraging developers and property owners in using innovative zoning provisions recently adopted, such as the open space zoning provision. A need was also seen for the consideration of area-wide protections, such as “Neighborhood Conservation Districts” for the protection of area-wide historic resources.

Acquisition issues and needs focused on the protection of scenic vistas, historic viewsheds and historic farms through the acquisition or gift of conservation easements or, where appropriate, fee acquisition. In addition, fee acquisition or conservation easements would be appropriate in avoiding the destruction of sensitive and important archaeological sites, dam and mill remains, and vulnerable and important geologic formations. Protecting historic structures, however, was seen to be the responsibility of private owners, including assisting owners in gifting preservation easements on their buildings.

Town projects issues and needs focused on protecting the aesthetics and visual quality of the town’s scenic roads. This included those historic structures that are within the rights-of-way of town roads, including stone walls, stone bridges, large trees and old dams, beginning with an inventory of such structures. The Town’s three historic cemeteries also need to be studied to determine how best to preserve its historic headstones and related structures.

Public awareness and advocacy efforts need to be focused on increasing the awareness of new owners of historic properties of the significance of what is in their care. Knowing about the history of a property is the first step in increasing an owner’s sensitivity and sense of stewardship. Public apathy and lack of awareness were often mentioned in forums and interviews as obstacles to historic preservation. There is a distinct need for both adequate informational materials and additional delivery systems to get these materials to their intended audience.

Goals and objectives for implementing the preservation plan

The goals and objectives in the Bolton Preservation Plan reflect the five categories of issues and needs mentioned above.

Survey and Planning Goals: The recommendations for survey and planning activities were taken from the recently prepared “Bolton Survey of Historic, Architectural and Cultural Resources,” prepared by preservation consultant Anne McCarthy Forbes. These recommendations can be summarized as (1) completing survey forms for those historic resources that have not yet been inventoried and (2) upgrading those forms that were completed in earlier surveys to current documentation standards of the Massachusetts Historical Commission. In addition, Ms. Forbes recommended that a system be developed that would allow the continuous updating of forms.

Regulatory Goals: Among the regulatory goals for residential construction recommended in the plan is the development of a design manual that would encourage new residential construction that respects traditional motifs in Bolton. Another recommendation is to develop a standard operating procedure for the Planning Board to notify the Historical Commission of new subdivisions during the preliminary plan stage.

For commercial districts, the plan recommends that the Town consider adopting a design review bylaw for commercial districts. It also recommends that, possibly as part of the long-range planning process, research be conducted on models of commercial development with the aim of developing regulations that result in such design.

The review of Chapter 61A is suggested to determine how effective it has been in protecting farmland, including how extensively it is being used, the adequacy of notification procedures, and the effectiveness of the Town's response to notification. Other farmland-related regulatory recommendations include the review of the newly-adopted Agricultural/Business zoning provision to increase its use and a review of regulatory options that could assist in the preservation of barns and other accessory farm structures.

These and other regulatory recommendations could be implemented as part of the work of the Long-Range Planning Committee.

Acquisition Goals: Land use regulations, while important, are by their nature limited in scope and effect. Acquisition may be needed to protect historic resources where no other option is effective. In Bolton, the protection of historic sites is closely tied to the acquisition of open space. Therefore, acquisition efforts in the area of historic preservation would be principally related to the protection of the context of historic structures by protecting the land around them. Acquisition could be either by purchase or gift and through either a conservation restriction or fee title.

Archeological sites---such as early building foundations and dam sites, Native American sites and significant geologic formations---are especially vulnerable to development that would destroy a site's integrity. Acquisition of a conservation restriction or fee purchase may be the most appropriate option in such instances.

Resident comments during the preparation of the preservation plan emphasized the protection of Bolton's unique panoramic views and the protection of its historic farms. Conservation easements or agricultural preservation restrictions are appropriate approaches to achieving protection goals for these landscapes. The Bolton Conservation Trust has been particularly active in working with farmers in town in exploring these options.

Many historic residences and other historic resources in town have been recommended in the Bolton survey for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places. For these and other sites, owners should be encouraged to consider gifting a conservation restriction or facade easement on their structures as a means of assuring their continued integrity over time.

A dialogue should be initiated with abutting towns where historic resources are shared. For example, cooperation with the Town of Berlin is possible on the preservation of the Quaker landscape and on farmland protection. The Bolton Conservation Trust is currently discussing with Berlin possible protection options for agricultural land on Sawyer Road. Lancaster, Clinton and Harvard also share important Native American settlement sites and unique geologic formations in common with Bolton.

Town Projects Goals: Goals in the Bolton Preservation Plan for the preservation of historic town property focus on the two areas of scenic roads and on the preservation of historic sites in town ownership. Scenic roads “frame” historic properties on private land, and the Town will have a significant impact on these roads as they are improved over time. Strategies for the use of appropriate guard rails, for the treatment of historic structures within rights-of-way (for example, stone walls), and for saving large trees need to be implemented.

The Town is a major holder of historic properties and a good steward of these sites. Additional efforts suggested in the plan include an analysis to assure long-term protection and conservation of the town’s historic cemeteries and the restoration of the original Baptist Meeting House.

Public Awareness and Advocacy Goals: Public awareness is the foundation of historic preservation in any community. Bolton’s fascinating history has left a legacy of beautiful buildings and important sites. Saving these sites will require that a broad spectrum of citizens knows the importance of this legacy and is determined to pass this heritage on to future generations. Stewardship begins with knowing.

Owners of historic properties are the most important preservation constituency, since they are the current stewards of the the town’s heritage. The plan recommends efforts to reach property owners, particularly new buyers of historic properties, including distributing copies of each site’s inventory form, acquainting realtors with the value of individual town historic sites, and reaching out to all owners of historic properties as a natural constituency for historic preservation in town.

In addition, the plan recommends a range of initiatives to increase the awareness of Bolton residents of the varied and rich heritage around them. To be effective, education needs to occur from a range of perspectives, from slide programs to house plaques. Bolton is fortunate in having organizations such as the Bolton Historical Commission, the Bolton Historical Society and the Bolton Conservation Trust that are conducting many such programs and are considering new initiatives.

The Historic Landscapes Preservation Strategy

While historic structures must be protected one building at a time, in a rural community such as Bolton, it is helpful look at the “larger picture” of saving the context and landscapes that surround historic sites. In addition, since many farm fields in Bolton have been cultivated for approximately 300 years (some cultivated perhaps 1,000 years ago by Native Americans), these vernacular sites are also historic in nature.

The Preservation Plan analyzes six areas or neighborhoods in Bolton and reviews possible strategies for protecting their historic resources. This closer look has allowed a more thorough investigation of how the goals of historic preservation and open space protection can be complementary and mutually-reinforcing. These areas include East Bolton, The Pan, Bolton Center, Wataquodock Hill Vistas and Historic Farms, the Quaker Landscape at Fryville and the Nashaway Landscape.

Tools and Techniques to Implement the Plan

Implementing the Bolton Preservation Plan will require the application of many different kinds of strategies and tools. The plan describes many approaches and techniques available to realize the plan. These include regulatory tools, acquisition tools, special districts, restoration funding options, information dissemination strategies, and educational resources. In addition, for each tool listed, a table is included which describes if Bolton has used it, how its application might be improved, and, if the tool is not being used, how it could be applied.

Five-Year Action Plan

Every plan needs a road map that describes how to arrive at the desired destination. The Five-Year Action Plan provides that road map. The plan takes each goal and objective and describes tasks required to begin implementing each objective, the lead agency in the effort, and the year for its implementation.

The fate of all too many plans is that they “remain on the shelf.” To prevent this from occurring, the Preservation Plan recommends that preservation and open space advocates in town schedule an annual “coordination day” each October. The purpose of this meeting would be to take stock of what has been implemented during the past year, what new opportunities have arisen, and what action agenda should be agreed upon for the coming year. The coordination day would have two purposes: (1) it would provide a specific date each year for the town to look at its goals for the coming year; and (2) it would provide an opportunity to update and revise the Action Plan on a yearly basis, recognizing that action plans become out-of-date rather quickly. The institution of this coordination day is one of the most important recommendations of the Preservation Plan and is central to implementing the plan.

An enormous amount of effort will be required to achieve the goals of this Preservation Plan. It is an ambitious document but one which can be realized with leadership and perseverance. The Town of Bolton is fortunate to possess individuals who have shown a remarkable degree of talent and determination in protecting Bolton’s natural and built environment. While the pressures of new development require that more be done within the near future if Bolton is to preserve its historic character, the town has shown that it has the leadership and resourcefulness to make the Bolton Preservation Plan a reality.