



## HISTORIC AND CULTURAL RESOURCES ELEMENT TECHNICAL PAPER

The Town of Blandford has a rich and varied history which dates back to pre-Colonial use. An abundance of built resources, such as Native American structures, residential buildings, and stone walls from pre-Colonial occupation through the mid-1900s, as well as early rural and agricultural landscapes, remain intact and are valued by residents even if they are not generally perceived as “historic.” An approachable government and local public and private groups, with enthusiastic volunteers, work to support the Town’s historic and cultural preservation and engagement. These stakeholders are a blended group of longtime and newer residents who are knowledgeable and interested in local history and are actively working to honor, share, and utilize the Town’s resources to benefit residents and attract likeminded visitors from throughout the region. Cultural programming includes events at the former First Congregational Church of Blandford, now owned by the Blandford Historical Society and known as the White Church of Blandford, attractions at the Blandford Fair Grounds, and Blandford Walks.<sup>1</sup> The Blandford Cultural Council utilizes a limited budget to promote robust programming as well. The White Church of Blandford, Porter Memorial Library, Blandford Fair Grounds, Blandford Historical Society Museum, Blandford General Store and Cafe, Blandford Country Club, the Old Burial Ground and the Hill Cemetery, and several residences and outbuildings related to agriculture are all examples of historic resources which remain, relate to Blandford history, and are relevant today. Challenges to preservation and cultural resource offerings include a serious deficit, compared to the rest of the Commonwealth, in the formal documentation of historic built cultural and archaeological resources, mixed opinions about the value of recognizing and preserving historic built resources, minimal funding for achieving preservation and cultural programming goals, and a small Town population with an even smaller pool of volunteers who are often stretched thin through involvement with multiple groups.

### OVERVIEW

A discussion of Blandford’s historic and cultural resources should first consider the history of Blandford. Members of the Woronoco Tribe were probably the earliest area inhabitants, using the land for summer hunting and trapping grounds prior to Colonial occupation and a primary Native American trail was in use from the Berkshire Highlands to the Housatonic Valley which later became known as “the Great Road to Housatonic.”<sup>2</sup> In 1735, Presbyterian Scottish-Irish settlers from Hopkinton arrived and the area became known as New Glasco or Glasgow until formal incorporation as the town of Blandford occurred on April 10, 1741. A road from Springfield to Great Barrington passed through the southern part of town and steady through traffic led to the establishment of several taverns to

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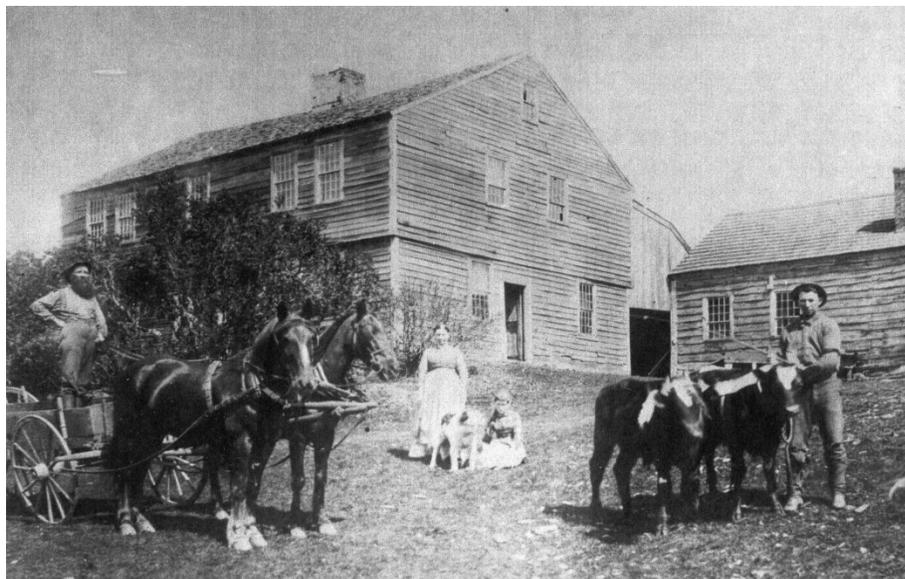
<sup>1</sup> Sampson, Mary Kate and Lee Hamburg, “First Congregational Church of Blandford,” 4 North Street (MHC Inventory #BLA.1), 1985 <https://mhc-macris.net/Details.aspx?Mhcid=BLA.1>, accessed 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

accommodate travelers. The *James Baird Tavern/Bartholomew House 2 Old Chester Road (1768, 1810, BLA.2)*, now a private residence, was an active meeting and resting place in proximity to regional transportation routes during the Revolutionary War, and shares context with “nearly every one of the country taverns throughout the colonies [which] bore some part in the Revolutionary struggle.”<sup>3</sup>

By 1759, a town street and highway was in use, with a view of the Woronoco and Connecticut Valleys.<sup>4</sup> With visitors regularly passing through, Blandford grew to become “the banner town of western Hampden, a stage center, and a social center as well.”<sup>5</sup> With Blandford’s development, the Great Road to Housatonic evolved to become the Old Post Road, today’s Massachusetts Route 23, also known as Otis Stage Road and the Blandford Turnpike. Eighteenth century travelers through Blandford included General Amherst and his army en route to Albany for the Battle of the Ticonderoga during the French and Indian War. In 1776, Colonel Henry Knox used routes through the town to transport cannons and artillery from Fort Ticonderoga, New York, to Boston to support Colonists in the fight for independence from English rule. British General John Burgoyne’s army also traveled through from Boston to New York after the 1777 surrender at Stillwater during the Battles of Saratoga.

Residential and agricultural properties were developed beginning in this period and many



remained or still remain in the same families for multiple generations. An example of this is the circa late 1700s Shepard Farm property along Otis Stage Road.

Photo of Shepard Farm  
ca. early 1800s

Photo:  
Blandford Historical Society

<sup>3</sup> Edward Field. *The Colonial Tavern. A Glimpse of New England Town Life in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries.* Providence: Preston and Rounds, 1897. *Archive.org*, accessed 2021. <https://archive.org/details/colonialtaverngl00fiel/page/n8>

<sup>4</sup> Sumner Gilbert Wood. *The Taverns and Turnpikes of Blandford*, Blandford: Sumner Gilbert Wood, 1908. *Ancestry.com*, accessed 2021, [https://www.ancestry.com/interactive/17383/dvm\\_LocHist004725-00001-0?backurl=&ssrc=&backlabel=Return#?imageld=dvm\\_LocHist004725-00009-1](https://www.ancestry.com/interactive/17383/dvm_LocHist004725-00001-0?backurl=&ssrc=&backlabel=Return#?imageld=dvm_LocHist004725-00009-1)

<sup>5</sup> “A Deserted Village. Old Days at Blandford.” *Springfield Republican*, February 11, 1870. *Genealogybank.com*, accessed 2021.



Slavery, legal in Massachusetts until 1780, brought enslaved and later freed African Americans to Blandford, to include Jethro Jones who “saw long and arduous service in Washington’s Army” and Jared Cables (ca. 1767-1857) a stable boy for the *James Baird Tavern*.<sup>6</sup> Active abolitionist and women’s right champion John Keep (1781-1870) was a pastor at Blandford’s First Church for 16 years beginning in 1805 and was concerned about ensuring that Blandford’s African American children received an adequate education. A small burial ground along Jethro Jones Road, historically related to a local farmer’s burial ground which provided space for his field hands, is connected to Blandford’s African American residents and is locally known but formally undocumented in the Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System (MACRIS).<sup>7</sup> A 1903 marker commemorating *Ye Old First Church of the Frontier Town of Blandford, Mass.* is located within the Town Common.

The *First Congregational Church of Blandford* was designed by regionally prominent architect Isaac Damon (1791-1862) and constructed in 1822. Today known as the White Church of Blandford, this building was documented and individually listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1985 and is currently owned, maintained, and seasonally operated by the Blandford Historical Society. This organization has actively fundraised and accessed grants for capital improvements to support this valued location for cultural programming.



White Church, Photo: Blandford Historical Society

Beginning in the 1830s, industrial ventures, with a concentration in North Blandford, produced leather, wool, rakes, and cheese and by 1845 Blandford had become the largest

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<sup>6</sup> Sumner Gilbert Wood, *Ibid*; Joseph Carvalho III, *Black Families in Hampden County, Massachusetts, 1650-1865, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*. Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society. *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, Vol. 40 (1/2) Summer 2021. Institute for Massachusetts Studies, Westfield State University. <http://pahmusa.mysite.com/Black%20Families.pdf>, accessed 2021.

<sup>7</sup> *Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System*, <https://mhc-macris.net/>



cheese producer in Massachusetts. Trace fragments of the factories and mills along with worker housing in continued residential use remain in North Blandford.



Blandford Fair Ferris Wheel ca. 1960s, Photo: Blandford Historical Society

The Blandford Fair began as a Farmer's Club in 1867 as a venue for exhibiting crops and animal competitions. The *Agricultural Union Hall* (1869) was the first building constructed at the *Blandford Fair Grounds* on North Street. As the fair evolved, it became a meeting spot for neighboring towns. The main event, now held from Friday through Monday over Labor Day weekend, has only been cancelled four times in more than 150 years: during the 1918-1919 Spanish Flu, during the 1940s for World War II, in 1955 due to catastrophic flooding from Hurricanes Connie and Diane, and in 2020 because of the Covid-19 Pandemic. Today's all-volunteer Blandford Fair Committee continues to care for the grounds and plan for future and evolving programming.

By the late nineteenth century, Blandford's hilltown location and scenic and rural landscape contributed to the town's establishment as a desirable summer retreat for residents from nearby areas like Springfield, Westfield, and Hartford, Connecticut, with five



hotels among the options for lodging. The *W. J. Peebles Post Office and General Store*, today known as the Blandford General Store and Café, was established during this time along Main Street and continues in service today in the center of town. *Porter Memorial Library*, constructed along Main Street in 1892, was funded by summer resident Josephine S. Porter (1834-1908) and named in memory of her son Edgar Sheffield Porter (1857-1891). The building construction used local kaolin clay from the Blandford Brick and Tile Company and at the time of construction the project was highlighted in the *Springfield Republican*.<sup>8</sup>



Porter Memorial Library today

The *Blandford Club*, today known as the Blandford Country Club and located in the former Porter family summer residence, was established in 1909 on North Street near the town center and the *Blandford Fair Grounds* as a privately owned, member only nine hole golf course.<sup>9</sup> Development of the short-lived Berkshire Street Railway trolley line around this time has left remnants of construction in North Blandford. Dairy farms and orchards were a primary source of area income and, as the area's population grew, side streets continued to develop with late Italianate, Queen Anne, Craftsman, and Colonial Revival style architecture along with agricultural outbuildings. From 1909 through 1910, Springfield constructed a water-supply reservoir on Borden Brook along the Blandford/Granville line

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<sup>8</sup> "Hampden County. A Fine Library for Blandford," *Springfield Republican*, December 5, 1891, *Genealogybank.com*

<sup>9</sup> "Blandford Club Notes Its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary," *Springfield Union*, August 24, 1959, *Genealogybank.com*



and claimed a large portion of the watershed, buying structures along the brook's tributaries.

The origins of the American film industry have direct ties to Blandford as between 1913 and 1924, 13 silent films were directed and produced at the Gibbs Road summer property of Ada Olive Singer Van Heusen (1871-1940) by nationally known actor and director Edward K. Lincoln (1884-1958), earning Blandford the nickname "Hollywood of the East."<sup>10</sup> Van Heusen was a granddaughter of inventor, actor and businessman, Isaac Merrit Singer (1811-1875). Lincoln and Van Heusen later married and moved to California.

A large portion of Gibbs Road property was taken by the Cobble Mountain Reservoir project, which occurred between 1928 and 1930. The construction and land condemnation of the Reservoir involved damming the Little River in Russell but most of the Reservoir and land taking were in Blandford, majorly impacting North Blandford and other town areas in proximity to the watershed. Circa 1930s structures associated with this project may remain on Cobble Mountain Road.

Catastrophic flooding from Hurricanes Connie and Diane in August of 1955 completely suspended access to Blandford from the rest of the Pioneer Valley along Route 23 and Russell Stage Road. This event is also an early example of the Town's resiliency under hardship as the General Store and Fair Grounds were both utilized at that time for food distribution and emergency response needs.

The Massachusetts Turnpike (Interstate 90) opened in 1957 and bisects the town with no direct exit. This presents preservation, land use, and travel challenges in Blandford.

Today, there are abundant traces of the built history of Blandford, coexisting with newer development and the Town's highly valued rural and agricultural landscape. The Main Street and North Village areas maintain a sense of a traditional New England village including traces of mill buildings and worker housing. Native American Ceremonial Landscapes and archaeological sites remain extant on privately owned property.<sup>11</sup> Colonial and later residents, including African and Euro-Americans, are honored in the local burial grounds and their social history is further tied to the remaining historic architectural resources. Agricultural landscapes, along with related residences and outbuildings, are prevalent with ties to Blandford's past, present, and future. Buildings constructed more than 100 years ago are being cared for and adaptively reused by groups like the Blandford

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<sup>10</sup> "Reel Row Turns on Acts of Real Mother-In-Law," *New York Daily Tribune*, December 9, 1914, *Genealogybank.com*

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Donta, "Teaberry Native American Site, Blandford, Massachusetts. *Conference on New England Archaeology*, <https://www.cnea-web.org/docs/2012CNEANewsletter.pdf>



Historical Commission and Blandford Historical Society or are in continuous use as a library, town store, fairground building, club house, residence, and agricultural outbuilding.

## INVENTORY AND EXISTING CONDITIONS

The Massachusetts Historical Commission (MHC) is the State Historic Preservation Office organized in 1971 related to the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act. According to the MHC, “Local Historical Commissions are an important part of municipal government in Massachusetts. Almost all cities and towns in Massachusetts have established a local historical commission. Historical Commissions are responsible for community-wide preservation planning.”<sup>12</sup> The Blandford Historical Commission currently has a presence on the town website, has seven members, and generally meets on a monthly basis either virtually or in person. Most, if not all members also serve on other boards, committees, or commissions in the Town.

Local historic preservation should begin with planning and documentation to formally identify an area’s remaining archaeological and built historic resources, structures, objects, areas, and landscapes with potential significance on a local, state, and national level. Documentation of existing conditions and historical narratives will then provide public record in the MACRIS database. If resources are found eligible and listed in the State and National Registers of Historic Places, additional funding opportunities may be available to support preservation, resiliency, and adaptive reuse.

The identification and documentation of historic and archaeological resources is listed as the first goal in the 2018-2022 *Massachusetts State Historic Preservation Plan*. The most recent state documentation of Blandford’s cultural resources was done through a 1982 MHC *Reconnaissance Survey Town Report* and a 1984 report on the *Historical and Archaeological Resources of the Connecticut Valley* which identified multiple remaining historic resources within the Town. The 1982 *Survey* recommended performing comprehensive inventory work to include formal research of the Blandford Center, North Blandford, isolated residential buildings along early developed roads and transportation routes, and groups of buildings related to the Blandford Fairgrounds and Cobble Mountain Reservoir. Preservation of the historic town center and farms, the establishment of meeting or gathering places, maintaining the viability of the fairgrounds, and establishing local “scenic” roads under MGL 40 were more recently identified as *Open Space and Recreation Goals* in the 2003-2004 *Town of Blandford Open Space and Recreation Plan*. That

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<sup>12</sup> “Local Historical Commissions in Massachusetts. A Summary Sheet for New Commission Members.” <https://www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc/mhcpdf/lhcsun.pdf>, accessed 2021.



plan identified the Porter Memorial Library, Watson Park, the Congregational Church (White Church of Blandford), the fairgrounds, and Blandford Club as *Scenic Resources and Unique Environments*. *Barns in the Highland Communities*, through the Trustees of Reservations Highland Communities Initiative with documentation by regional preservation planner Bonnie Parsons included agricultural related resources in Blandford.<sup>13</sup>

As of early 2021, there are only 13 inventory points for Blandford in the MACRIS database. This can be compared to 114 in Otis, more than 187 in Russell, 177 in Huntington, 306 in Chester, and 174 in Granville. Recent work by the Blandford Historical Commission, made possible through a Town budget allocation and developed with Historic Preservation Local Technical Assistance by the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission included a 2020 Survey and Planning Grant application to the MHC. The project was deemed too small by MHC and a potential state discretionary funding project to support inventory work also didn't come to fruition. This has led to the town working directly with the PVPC to document the *Blandford Main Street* and *Shepard Farm* Areas throughout 2021. Continued planning for and execution of formal documentation to include all of Blandford's historic and cultural resources will support the town's local planning process, is in accordance with the state's preservation plan, and could lead to funding and other preservation and cultural programming opportunities.

Additionally, the Porter Memorial Library, Town Hall, Historical Society, and Blandford Fair Committee all have various types of irreplaceable collections related to local and regional history, to include archival, object, and ephemera, that should be considered in the resilient planning process. Digitization is a good option for back-up paper storage but planning should also consider best practices for storing existing collections, preparing for extreme weather and long-term durability, and utilizing these resources for cultural programming.



2<sup>nd</sup> Floor of the Blandford Historical Society, Photo: Blandford Historical Society

<sup>13</sup> [http://blandfordmasterplan.pvpc.org/docs/Blandford%20-%20OSRP\\_for\\_state\\_reduced\\_size2004-Town.pdf](http://blandfordmasterplan.pvpc.org/docs/Blandford%20-%20OSRP_for_state_reduced_size2004-Town.pdf) ; <https://www.umass.edu/architecture/sites/default/files/assets/architecture/preservation-barns-in-the-highland-communities.pdf>



## ISSUES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Blandford contains many historic and cultural resources that are generally valued by residents but are not comprehensively documented and recognized as assets. Feedback during the 2021 Resilient Master Planning process indicated that the White Church of Blandford, the Porter Memorial Library, Watson Park, the Historical Society Building, the Blandford Fair Grounds, the Blandford General Store and Café, Shepard Farm, the Blandford Country Club, and the multiple agricultural properties continue to stand out to residents as the town's most significant local built historic and cultural resources. Cultural programming such as concerts at the White Church of Blandford, programming sponsored by the Historical Society, events, exhibits, and art shows at the Blandford Fair Grounds, and organic, year round activities like the newly mapped Blandford Walks routes are valued and beneficial for town residents and guests.

To help focus efforts, developing an overall Preservation Plan to include identifying significant and irreplaceable built and cultural resources like Native American sites, public, residential, commercial, and agricultural buildings and structures such as stone walls will benefit the town in determining the best way to proceed with documentation, protection, and use for the public benefit. Identifying potential funding sources to complete project goals and utilizing local talent and resources like the regional planning authority and other local agencies could be helpful to plan for projects.

For an area abundant in natural beauty, there are also challenges related to residential access of recreational land due to current restrictions on parcels owned by the Springfield Water & Sewer Company. The 121 acre town-owned Shepard Farm property at 246 Otis Stage Road is within the General Knox Historic Trail area and includes a circa late 1700s residential building and late 1900s agricultural building. The parcel abuts Springfield Water & Sewer land and is currently limited in its entirety and in perpetuity by a conservation restriction which also presents a barrier to the preservation and reuse of the existing buildings and/or of the property for residential/agricultural and/or recreational purposes. The deteriorated state of the built resources and lack of funding for major capital improvements to the buildings for residential and/or agricultural use presents another barrier. The Town is currently working with the PVPC to inventory the Shepard Farm property in MACRIS as the social history of the property, the remaining built resources, and the landscape are locally significant and worthy of documentation in spite of more recent alterations and restrictions.



Cultural opportunities can build on previous and current initiatives. The Blandford Cultural Council is a valuable resource and supports local programming on a limited budget. A 1993 “Back to Blandford” weekend, organized by multiple Town groups, resulted in nearly \$300,000 in funds raised to support restoration work on the White Church of Blandford. More recently, the Blandford Historical Society has been very successful in fund raising and achieving a Massachusetts Cultural Council grant to support the church’s preservation. The 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the White Church construction is coming up in 2022 and will be a good opportunity for local preservation and cultural resource groups like the Blandford Historical Society, Blandford Historical Commission, Porter Memorial Library, Blandford Cultural Council, and Blandford Fair Committee and other stakeholders to work together on planning and programming for public benefit.

Existing resources can be considered community assets to support preservation and cultural programming. The *Blandford Community Development Plan* (2003) identified the Town Common as a potential area suitable for passive and accessible recreation with existing resources like a Bicentennial Oak planted in 1935 and some interpretive signage related to the site of the town’s first church. This area could become part of a designated Massachusetts Cultural District and enhanced for resident use with “wayfinding” and interpretive signage. Support to develop community arts festivals and events was another 2003 *Community Development Plan* strategy and existing, underutilized historic spaces could be considered as resources to help achieve this goal. The town-owned Porter Memorial Library and Blandford Historical Society buildings both have initial plans developed for compatibly designed additions to meet ongoing programming, storage, and accessibility compliance needs. The Blandford Fair Committee all-volunteer team anticipates continued programming in 2021 once public gathering restrictions are lifted and this venue can be perceived as an asset and an opportunity for cultural partnerships.

Exploring the adaptive reuse of currently owned town resources like the agricultural buildings in Watson Park for potential public venues would honor the Town’s past and present agricultural economy and support local cultural programming. Utilizing the Town’s existing resources, encouraging and facilitating partnerships among groups with similar missions, and cultivating strategic community outreach campaigns to promote understanding and encourage participation in the preservation of Blandford’s historic and cultural resources could also help support a small volunteer base that is already over extended.

