

Communitywide Historic Preservation Plan

Town of Webster

Webster, Massachusetts

Webster Historical Commission
and
Planning, Conservation, and Economic
Development Department

September 2024



COMMUNITYWIDE HISTORIC PRESERVATION PLAN

TOWN OF WEBSTER

Webster, Massachusetts

Prepared for the
Webster Historical Commission
and
Planning, Conservation, and Economic Development Department
Town of Webster

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September 2024

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Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
Summary of Priority Recommendations and Actions.....	3
CHAPTER 1 • INTRODUCTION TO HISTORIC PRESERVATION PLANNING . 13	
Preservation Planning.....	14
National and State Preservation Programs	16
Historical Significance - What is Historic?.....	18
Preservation Principles and Approach.....	21
<i>Cultural Landscape Context</i>	21
<i>Preservation Treatments of Structures</i>	22
<i>Authenticity and Integrity</i>	24
<i>Secretary of the Interior's Standards</i>	25
<i>Conclusion</i>	30
CHAPTER 2 • HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND RESOURCES	31
Environmental Context.....	33
Indigenous Peoples.....	37
Contact Period (1500-1620); Plantation Period (1620-1675); and Colonial Period (1675-1775)	38
Federal Period (1775-1830)	39
Early Industrial Period (1830-1870).....	45
Late Industrial Period (1870-1915).....	51
Early Modern Period (1915-1940)	56
Late Modern Period (1940-Present)	61
CHAPTER 3 • INVENTORY, RECOGNITION, AND TREATMENT	65
Historical Commission	66
<i>Responsibilities of Historical Commission Members</i>	67
<i>Community Preservation Act</i>	69
Historic Resource Inventories in Webster	71
<i>1979 Inventory</i>	72
<i>2000 Inventory</i>	72
<i>Inventory Recommendations</i>	75
National Register of Historic Places.....	77
<i>North Village and South Village</i>	78
<i>Additional Potential National Register Districts and Sites</i>	79
Treatment of Historic Properties.....	82
<i>Public Outreach</i>	85
<i>Design Guidelines</i>	86
<i>Local Historic Districts</i>	88
<i>Neighborhood Conservation Districts</i>	90
<i>Neighborhood Associations</i>	92
<i>Municipal Rental Property Programs</i>	93
<i>Cemeteries</i>	96
<i>Conclusion</i>	98

CHAPTER 4 • PLANNING AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT 99

Promoting Historic Webster	102
<i>Town Policy and Planning Leadership</i>	102
<i>Identity and Branding</i>	103
<i>Community Preservation Act</i>	106
<i>Context Sensitive Design</i>	107
Downtown Webster	110
<i>Continuing Revitalization</i>	110
<i>Business Improvement District</i>	113
<i>Main Street Manager</i>	113
<i>Wayfinding</i>	116
The French River Mill District.....	117
<i>Owner/Developer Support and Recruitment</i>	118
<i>Master Plan</i>	122
<i>French River Trail</i>	124
East and South Main Streets.....	126
<i>Historic Building Preservation and Reuse</i>	127
<i>Design Standards</i>	130
Historic Neighborhoods	132
Webster Lake	134
Zoning and Growth Management	135
<i>Chapter 650, Zoning</i>	135
<i>Rules and Regulations Covering the Subdivision of Land</i>	137
<i>Scenic Roads</i>	138

CHAPTER 5 • PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT 139

History of Webster.....	140
Townwide Interpretive Presentation.....	141
<i>Samuel Slater Experience</i>	141
<i>Branding and Wayfinding</i>	143
<i>Interpretive Planning and Design</i>	144
<i>Desired Visitor Experience</i>	145
<i>Audiences</i>	146
<i>Outdoor Exhibits</i>	148
<i>Public Art</i>	150
<i>Landscape Installations as Placemakers</i>	152
<i>Guiding Principles</i>	155
Community Programming and Events	157
Website and Orientation	158

APPENDICES

- A. Action Plan - Summary of Recommendations and Priorities
- B. National and State Historic Preservation Programs
- C. Partners and Stakeholders
- D. Planning Context
- E. Historic Property Inventories
- F. National Register of Historic Places - Analysis of Existing Listings and Eligibility
- G. Bylaws and Regulations

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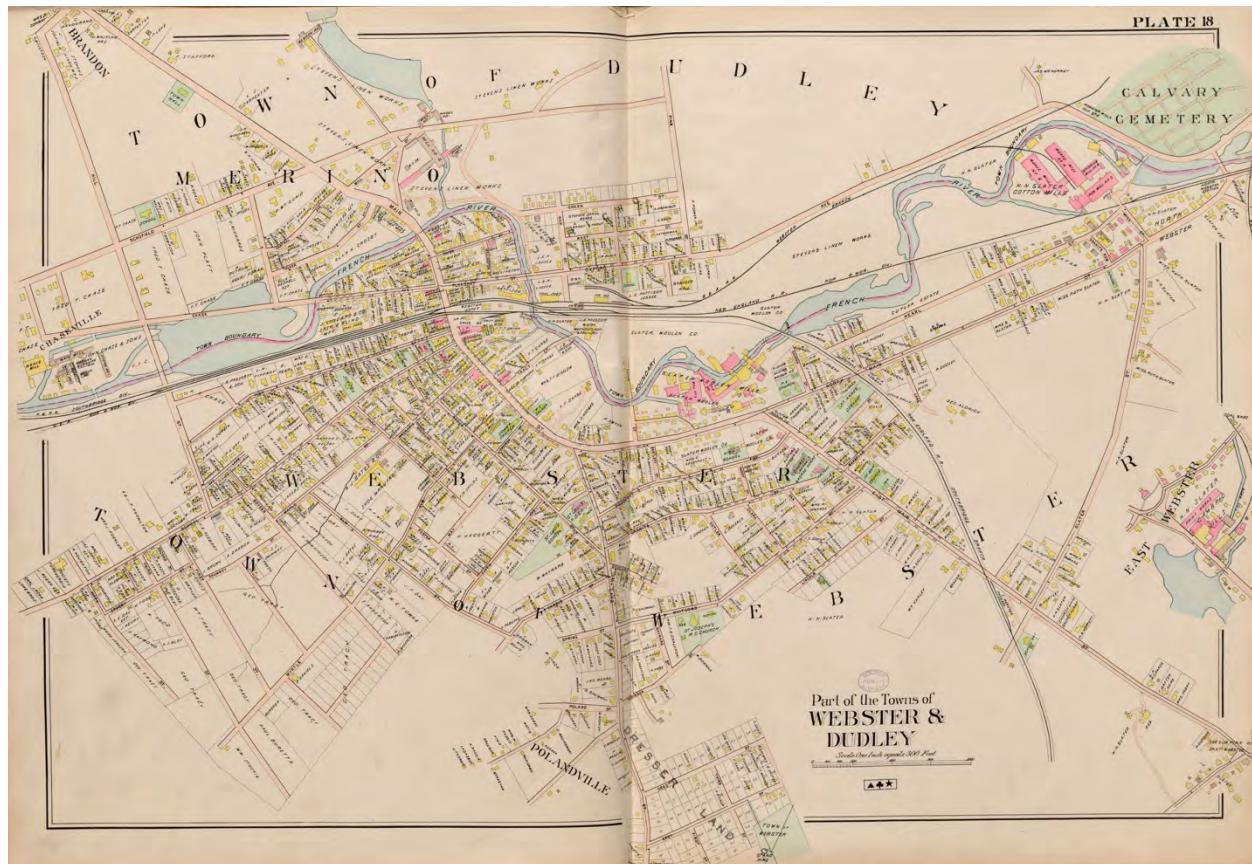


Plate 18 showing Webster's historic core including North, South, and East Villages
from the 1898 Atlas of Worcester County by L.J. Richards & Co.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In December 2023, the Town of Webster began work on a Communitywide Historic Preservation Plan, building upon an array of Town initiatives focused on the revitalization of Webster's historic core. Funded in part by a Survey and Planning Grant from the Massachusetts Historical Commission (MHC) and led by Webster's Historical Commission and Planning, Conservation, and Economic Development Department, the Town undertook a comprehensive review of its historic resources and their role in community revitalization and quality of life.

Over the following nine months, the Historical Commission and its consultants assessed the range and condition of Webster's historic resources, aligned with recent and ongoing planning and economic development initiatives, identified potential partners and stakeholders, and developed a program of recommendations and actions to leverage Webster's historic resources in support of broad-based community goals.

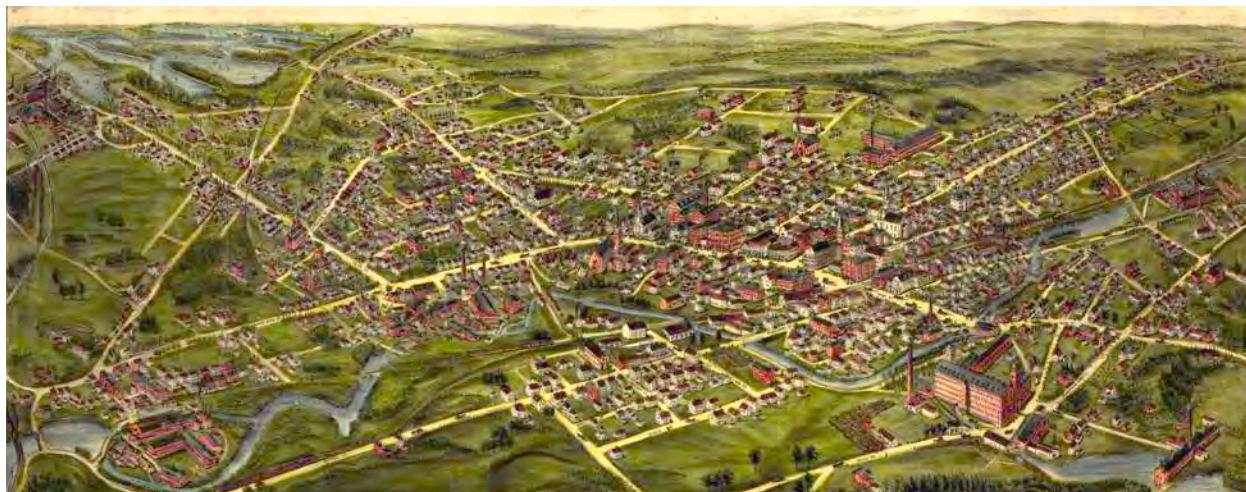
Webster's identity and significance is unique among New England's historic mill towns because of its association with Samuel Slater, known as the "Father of the American Industrial Revolution," and his family. It was in Webster that Slater focused his endeavors, establishing the first of several cotton and woolen mills and mill villages in 1812 and founding Webster as a new town in 1832.

The mills and mill villages Slater created in Webster were distinctive—company towns embracing family life patterns in rural New England, employing entire families and providing company-owned housing, stores, schools, and farms in largely self-sufficient communities.

Slater's sons continued the management and growth of the mill communities in Webster, adapting to competition and conditions over the course of the 19th century. By the early 20th century, Webster's mills remained prosperous, and its mill villages were still readily identifiable as distinct historic communities.

Today, Webster retains much of its historic integrity. While the mill operations are gone, mill sites, remnant site features, and a number of mill buildings are still present. Most importantly, the residential villages surrounding the mills retain their historic integrity, with resources spanning the 19th and early 20th centuries and representing the entire history of Webster's mill development.

Over the past two decades, the Town of Webster has been undertaking significant initiatives to revitalize its historic downtown Main Street commercial core and undertake other important community economic development initiatives. Webster's economy is stable and is growing due to a number of factors. The Town has not yet, however, implemented measures fully incorporating its historic villages into its vision for community revitalization, including protection of their historic resources and character while revitalization is underway.



1892 bird's eye view of Webster looking southeast, with East Village and Webster Lake in the upper left, North Village in the lower left, the French River flowing lower left to middle right, and Downtown at center right.
(Webster, Massachusetts, O.H. Bailey & Co., Boston, 1892)

The goal of this Historic Preservation Plan is to outline a coordinated historic preservation program for Webster embracing revitalization initiatives that have already been undertaken and reinforcing those initiatives by broadening the scope of historic preservation activity for the future. Historic building and village/neighborhood resources are central to Webster's identity, significance, and community character.

This Historic Preservation Plan emphasizes the role of history as a component of community character and identifies ways it can be recognized, strengthened,

and enhanced through public and private action. The plan takes a community village/neighborhood approach – examining the patterns and character defining features of Webster’s mill villages as an interconnected historic landscape.

The plan seeks to incorporate preservation planning principles, concepts, and methodologies into Webster’s long-term economic development, revitalization, and growth management strategies. It seeks ways to continue to foster growth and change using historic character and resources as economic assets.

Webster’s Historic Preservation Plan is divided into five chapters:

Chapter 1, *Introduction to Historic Preservation Planning*, outlines historic preservation principles and concepts for application in Webster’s preservation, planning, and economic revitalization programs.

Chapter 2, *Historical Development and Resources*, illustrates Webster’s physical development by historic period with discussion of context, significance, and the types of buildings and resources that were created.

Chapter 3, *Inventory, Recognition, and Treatment*, outlines a comprehensive historic preservation program for Webster using traditional, time-tested historic preservation tools and methodologies applied to local conditions and opportunities. These include the role of Webster’s Historical Commission, the Town’s inventory of historic resources, listings in the National Register of Historic Places, and use of design guidelines and designation of local historic districts. A program of public outreach in the appropriate treatment of historic buildings is emphasized.

Chapter 4, *Planning and Economic Development*, demonstrates how historic preservation concepts may be applied to Webster’s planning and economic development strategies, supporting and building upon the Town’s Downtown revitalization initiatives. This chapter highlights recommendations for specific areas of Webster—Downtown, the French River Mill District, North and South Villages, and other historic neighborhoods—suggesting how to use historic character in community revitalization.

Chapter 5, *Public Engagement*, reinforces a theme presented throughout the Historic Preservation Plan in using Webster’s unique and distinctive history as the basis for identity, branding, and promotion. The chapter outlines a potential Townwide interpretive presentation that can be phased in over time, embracing and building upon the Samuel Slater Experience and French River Park as interpretive destinations for visitors and residents—using historic places as economic development attractions.

Summary of Priority Recommendations and Actions

Recommendations are presented throughout the chapters noted above with supporting context and additional details for consideration. Appendix A of this plan, *Action Plan – Recommendations and Priorities*, lists the recommendations by topic, outlines which entities should take responsibility for implementation of those recommendations, and sorts the recommendations into three levels of priority.

In general, the plan's recommendations can be organized into two groupings: 1) traditional historic preservation tools as outlined in Chapter 5 that are primarily the responsibility of Webster's Historical Commission, and 2) townwide recommendations as outlined in Chapters 4 and 5 that are primarily under the oversight of Webster's Board of Selectmen. The Historic Preservation Plan's townwide recommendations could be the basis for updating Webster's Master Plan, which the Board of Selectmen is currently considering.

The following recommendations are most important and of highest priority for implementation in the near term.



Adoption of the Community Preservation Act will enable Webster to access state matching funds for open space preservation, preservation of historic resources, development of affordable housing, and the acquisition and development of outdoor recreational facilities.

RECOMMENDATION 3C: Organize and advocate for the adoption of the Community Preservation Act by Town Meeting. Priority one recommendation to be undertaken by the Board of Selectmen, Historical Commission, Conservation Commission, and Webster Housing Authority.

Adoption of the Community Preservation Act by Webster is the most important first step in the implementation of this Historic Preservation Plan. While not solely a historic preservation interest, the recommendation for adoption of the Community Preservation Act is included in Chapter 3 as an immediate action to be led by the Historical Commission. With support from Town staff, the Historical Commission should immediately engage with the Board of Selectmen, Conservation Commission, Webster Housing Authority, and other local preservation, conservation, and recreation entities in working toward adoption of the Act.

Massachusetts' Community Preservation Act (CPA, MGL Chapter 44B) enables adopting communities to raise local dedicated funds for open space preservation, preservation of historic resources, development of affordable housing, and the acquisition and development of outdoor recreational facilities.

Local funds are matched by distributions from the state's Community Preservation Trust Fund. *Webster residents currently pay into the state level Trust without receipt of its benefits in return.*

Historic preservation projects eligible for funding through the CPA include bricks and mortar projects for public and non-profit-owned buildings and resources as well as preservation planning studies such as historic resource inventories, National Register nominations, historic structure reports, cultural landscape reports, management plans, and other preservation related planning studies. Funds may also be used as grants for preservation projects on private property, which can be an important incentive for properties within a local historic district or for downtown facade improvements.

The Community Preservation Act is the most important source of grant funding for the Commonwealth's most active and effective historical commissions, land conservation entities, community park programs, and housing organizations.

The statewide non-profit Community Preservation Coalition can provide guidance to Webster in the steps necessary for successful adoption. In general, three steps are needed: (1) coordinate with other Town boards, commissions, and committees on the benefits of the CPA and obtain their active support; (2) prepare a summary report on the details and benefits of adoption that can be made available to residents and property owners, and (3) implement a public outreach program to residents and property owners with information on the benefits of adoption.

Sample summary reports with detailed technical information on CPA adoption have been prepared by other municipalities in their successful campaigns and are available from the Community Preservation Coalition. To a significant degree, these sample reports can simply be adapted and updated for Webster's use.

Adoption of the Community Preservation Act is an important action for Webster and could be coordinated with a matching action by Dudley in implementation of their economic development planning. Adoption was also recommended in Webster's 2018 Open Space and Recreation Plan and was to have been implemented within the first year. It is essential that Webster adopt the Community Preservation Act as soon as possible in furtherance of the Town's economic and quality of life goals.



The work of Webster's Historical Commission is vital in promoting the preservation and appropriate treatment of historic buildings.

RECOMMENDATION 3A: Organize the Webster Historical Commission to take responsibility for the overall leadership and coordination of the Town's historic preservation program as outlined in this preservation plan. *Priority one recommendation to be undertaken by the Webster Historical Commission with support from Planning staff and the Board of Selectmen.*

RECOMMENDATION 3I: Implement an ongoing program of public outreach to engage and support property owners in the appreciation and appropriate treatment of their historic properties. *Priority one recommendation to be undertaken by the Webster Historical Commission.*

Webster's Historical Commission was recently reconstituted and revitalized with new membership and a sense of dedication toward the recognition and preservation of the Town's historic resources. This Historic Preservation Plan is an early action of the reconstituted Historical Commission with the goal of outlining and prioritizing preservation strategies and actions.

Most important is that the Historical Commission maintain momentum and continue moving forward, step by step, while recognizing its limited capacity as a volunteer organization. The role of the Historical Commission is to make historic preservation central to Webster's identity and quality of life and to help integrate historic preservation values and considerations into every aspect of Town programs and processes.

The Historical Commission addresses its responsibilities by overseeing and coordinating the implementation of Webster's local historic preservation program as outlined in this plan.

The Historical Commission should participate actively in Town governance and be integral to Town activities, policies, and programs. As an advisory body, the Historical Commission should make sure that other Town entities have the

information and guidance they need to make informed decisions about actions that may have an impact upon historic buildings, structures, landscapes, and sites.

The Historical Commission should work closely with Board of Selectmen, Economic Development Committee, Planning Board, and Conservation Commission. It should work closely with other Town commissions, committees, and staff that are likely to have an impact on the physical character of the community. It should make recommendations to these bodies on issues related to historic preservation and advocate for the appropriate treatment of historic resources.

The most important and cost effective action that the Historical Commission can take is to reach out to property owners to encourage and support them in the appropriate treatment of their historic buildings. This includes both owner-occupied properties and rental properties. This action can be implemented on an ongoing basis in accordance with its capabilities and resources. Its goal is to raise the interest and awareness of property owners in the history and character of their properties and to provide them with information and support in their appropriate treatment.

Specific public outreach actions that might be considered are outlined in Chapter 3. Additional inventory work of undocumented historic neighborhoods and the updating of inventory forms prepared in 2000 are also outlined in Chapter 3 and should be undertaken in a phased manner over time as funding resources permit.



Webster's North Village and South Village residential neighborhoods are uniquely significant historic areas that should be preserved and enhanced.

RECOMMENDATION 3D: Update inventory area forms for North Village, South Village, and East Village taking in account resources that have been

demolished and resources that were not previously included. Priority one recommendation to be undertaken by the Webster Historical Commission.

RECOMMENDATION 3G: Prepare nominations of North Village and South Village to the National Register of Historic Places. Priority one recommendation to be undertaken by the Webster Historical Commission.

Listing on the National Register of Historic Places raises public awareness of the significance of a building or area thereby encouraging their appropriate care and treatment. Most important in Webster is the designation of North Village and South Village as National Register Historic Districts to both raise public awareness and lay the groundwork for additional future preservation and rehabilitation initiatives.

North Village, South Village, and East Village were the original village areas that included and developed around the Slater mills over the 19th century. While many of the historic mill buildings are gone, a few mill buildings remain along with the sites of former mill buildings and numerous site features.

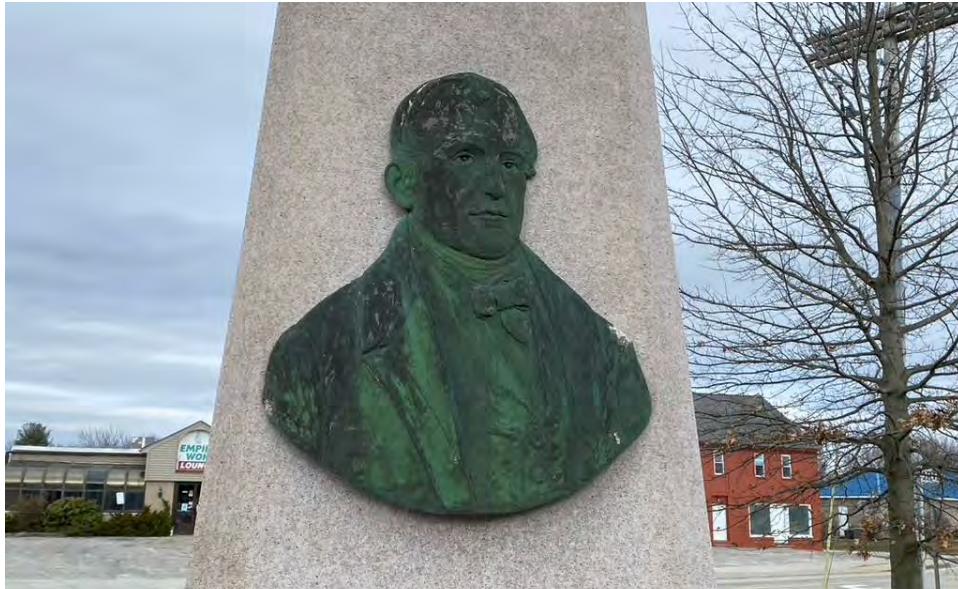
Importantly, the residential village areas around the former mills remain largely intact with a high degree of integrity. This is especially true for North Village, where little residential building loss has occurred since the mill closed in 1938. In South Village, building loss has occurred along South Main Street before and since the 2000 inventory was conducted, however the village still appears to retain enough integrity for listing.

The recommendation for listing of North and South Villages as a priority action is specifically intended to raise their public profile to help prevent additional building loss and to encourage the appropriate treatment of buildings by property owners.

In preparation for this action, the Historical Commission should consult with the Massachusetts Historical Commission (MHC) on process with respect to obtaining an initial opinion on eligibility. Assuming that conditions have not materially changed since area forms were prepared for the two villages in 2000, it is hoped that new National Register nominations can update, supplement, and fill in previous inventory work.

The Historical Commission can apply for an MHC Survey and Planning Grant to retain professional consultants to undertake this work. CPA funds may also be used.

Potential boundaries for these districts should be reassessed, perhaps including additional adjacent areas. If possible, designation of the villages as Local Historic Districts would be highly desirable as discussed in Chapter 3. Building public awareness through listing on the National Register is an important first step and will encourage preservation, appropriate investment, and revitalization.



Webster's unique relationship to Samuel Slater and the Slater family provides an opportunity for branding and promotion that sets the Town apart from other places.

RECOMMENDATION 4D: Adopt Samuel Slater and the Slater family's mill history and story as Webster's identity and brand to be prominently used in marketing and economic development. Priority one recommendation to be undertaken by the Board of Selectmen and Webster's economic development stakeholders.

An important step Webster can take in emphasizing community character is adoption of the Town's historic character as the identity Webster projects to the public it is trying to attract. Identity and branding should be key marketing tools central to the Webster's economic development strategy of making Downtown a regional hub of public activity and promoting its historic neighborhoods to regional audiences as desirable places to live and invest.

Identity and branding support economic development by projecting a visual impression to residents and visitors that is recognizable, appealing, and immediately communicates a sense of quality and expectation.

Webster should make the most of its history by adopting Slater as its identity and brand and proactively projecting this brand as central to its marketing. Creation of a Slater brand for Webster places the Town's history at the center of its identity and economic strategy. Its implementation emphasizes using historic character and historic resources for economic benefit, aggressively promoting Webster's Downtown, mill districts, and historic neighborhoods as economic attractions.

Webster's branding can begin immediately just by doing it. However, it should be developed as part of a broader creative marketing campaign for use in economic development and promotion. Branding should include development of a graphic identity and messaging as well as the means by which they will be used to promote Webster.



Webster has made significant strides in revitalization of its Downtown core. Additional actions will help bring this work to fruition and establish Downtown into a visitor destination.

RECOMMENDATION 4K: Implement a full Main Street program in Downtown Webster with a Main Street Manager coordinating programs. Priority one recommendation to be implemented by Downtown businesses and property owners in coordination with the Town.

Main Street programs are a proven technique for the revitalization of historic downtown centers. The National Main Street Program was created in 1977 by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. As of 2020, there were 860 nationally accredited local Main Street programs and 44 state or regional coordinating programs. These designated programs follow best practices in Main Street revitalization, including support of a full-time Main Street Manager to implement the program locally.

With its infrastructure improvements and other enhancements, Webster has already adopted portions of the Main Street four-point approach. Lacking is the ongoing staff work a Main Street Manager would provide in proactively attracting high quality restaurants, services, and stores; organizing events; and marketing.

A Main Street Manager is needed to coordinate the effort, proactively recruit businesses and services Downtown, organize events, and undertake promotion. Webster's small economic development staff does not have the capacity to perform these needed services. The Main Street initiative could be a shared program with Dudley in implementation of its Dudley Gateway Plan, and it could be funded through establishment of a Business Improvement District as the community has been considering and is discussed in Chapter 4 of this plan.



The historic Spinning and Carding Mill in South Village (1876)—Webster’s historic French River Mill District has the potential to be a long-term economic driver.

RECOMMENDATION 4M: Actively engage with and support private sector developers interested in and capable of undertaking mill rehabilitation revitalization projects. *Priority one recommendation to be implemented by the Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, and economic development staff.*

RECOMMENDATION 4N: Prepare a master plan for redevelopment of the French River Mill District including the historic industrial areas of South Village and North Village. *Priority one recommendation to be implemented by the Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, and economic development staff.*

Webster’s historic French River Mill District provides an important long-term revitalization opportunity involving the rehabilitation of remaining historic mill buildings and the addition of new high quality rental housing. Numerous examples of the rehabilitation of mill districts exist for Webster to emulate.

Of immediate importance is for the Town to actively support ongoing private sector development projects, including the Stevens Mill in Dudley and the Perry Yarn Mill in North Village. Once implemented, these projects will begin to establish the Mill District as a reality and will provide infrastructure improvements which can be expanded by new projects.

An additional step is preparation of a master plan that assesses the potential for additional redevelopment and outlines the design concept. The master plan should document existing conditions in an engineering base survey plan. Identified historic site features documented in the survey plan, such as foundations, raceways, ruins, and other features, should be preserved and incorporated into the master plan’s conceptual design. Existing buildings should be preserved for rehabilitation and adaptive reuse. A master plan is the essential step in planning and assessment of development potential and phasing priorities. Once that potential is determined, the Town can discuss additional implementation projects with private sector developers.



Webster's *Samuel Slater Experience* provides an anchor and model of experiential learning that can be emulated and extended to historic places throughout the Town.

RECOMMENDATION 5B: Undertake phased implementation of a Townwide interpretive presentation as an economic revitalization strategy to strengthen identity, raise public awareness for residents, and help position Webster as a destination and attraction for visitors. *Phased recommendation to be led by the Board of Selectmen in partnership with Webster's economic stakeholders.*

The most important need for historic preservation in Webster going forward is the engagement of residents in appreciation of the Town's history and the resources that contribute to Webster's historic character. A Townwide interpretive presentation can be organized and implemented in Webster over time to strengthen the Town's identity, raise public awareness about that identity, and use that identity for economic revitalization.

The core idea is to turn Webster into an interpretive attraction through the phased installation of creative, self-guided, outdoor interpretive exhibits and installations in public places throughout Webster telling the Town's stories using historic buildings, features, and places in the storytelling. Downtown Webster, the Mill District, and historic mill village neighborhoods are places where the presentation should be featured.

The presentation should feature and take inspiration from the world class Samuel Slater Experience as its key attraction. It should be coordinated site-to-site and implemented over time as opportunities are presented, building on outdoor exhibits the Town has already installed, such as in French River Park. It should use best practices for interpretation and engagement.

Preparation of a Community Interpretive Plan by a creative design consultant would identify creative opportunities and ideas and provide a blueprint for implementation and guidelines for quality control.



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO HISTORIC PRESERVATION PLANNING

Webster's identity and significance is unique among New England's historic mill towns. Samuel Slater is known as the "Father of the American Industrial Revolution," bringing British textile technology to the United States and adapting it to create the American factory system. While his initial textile mills along the Blackstone River in Rhode Island were significant, it was in Webster where Slater committed his endeavors, establishing the town in 1832 around the mills and mill villages he began developing in 1812. The mill villages he created were distinctive—company towns embracing family life patterns in New England, employing entire families and providing company-owned housing, stores, schools, and farms in a largely self-sufficient community endeavor.

Slater's sons continued the management and growth of the mill communities in Webster, adapting to competition and conditions over the course of the 19th century. By the early 20th century, Webster's mills remained prosperous, and its mill villages were still readily identifiable as distinct historic communities.

Today, Webster retains much of its historic integrity. While the mill operations are gone, mill sites, remnant site features, and a number of mill buildings are still present. Most importantly, the residential villages surrounding the mills

retain their historic integrity, with resources spanning the 19th and early 20th centuries and representing the entire history of Webster's mill development.

Over the past two decades (the historic East Village mill site closed in 2009), the Town of Webster has been undertaking significant initiatives to revitalize the historic downtown Main Street commercial core and undertake other important community economic development initiatives. Webster's economy is stable and is growing due to a number of factors. The Town has not yet, however, implemented measures fully incorporating its historic villages into its vision for community revitalization, including protection of their historic resources and character while revitalization is underway.

The goal of this Historic Preservation Plan is to outline a coordinated historic preservation program for Webster that embraces revitalization initiatives that have already been undertaken and reinforces those initiatives by broadening the scope of historic preservation activity for the future. Historic building and village/neighborhood resources are central to Webster's identity, significance, and community character. The purpose of this chapter is to briefly describe the basics of preservation planning and to outline and promote the principles of historic preservation that are its essence and core.

This Historic Preservation Plan emphasizes the role of history as a component of community character and identifies ways it can be recognized, strengthened, and enhanced through public and private action. As discussed below, the plan takes a community village/neighborhood approach – examining the patterns and character defining features of Webster's mill villages as an interconnected historic landscape, rather than as isolated elements.

This Preservation Plan seeks to incorporate preservation planning concepts and methodologies into Webster's long-term economic development, revitalization, and growth management strategies. It seeks ways to continue to foster growth and change using historic character and resources as economic drivers.

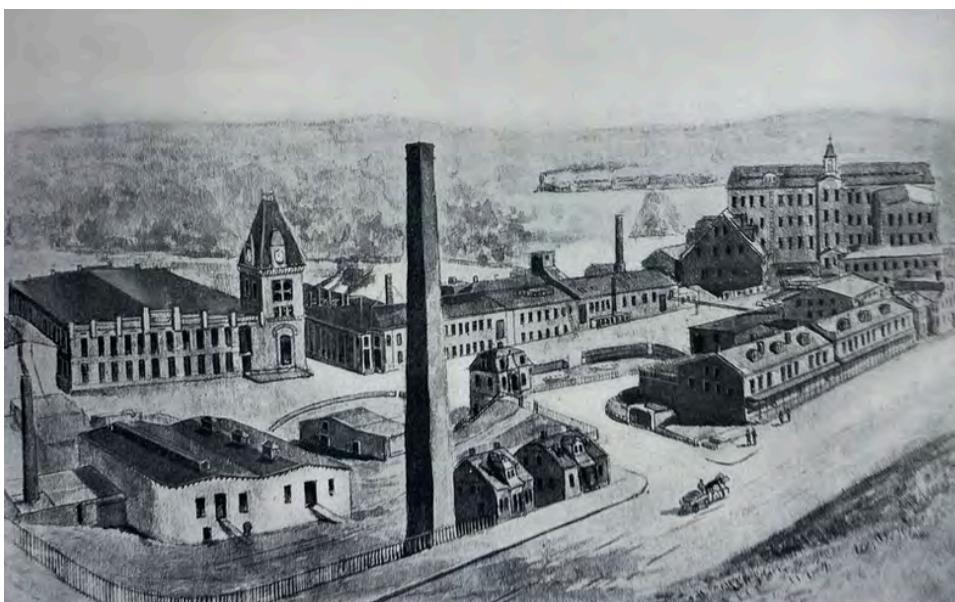
PRESERVATION PLANNING

Preservation planning is the means through which a coordinated long-term program of historic preservation actions may be developed by a community to guide its work over time. The principal responsibilities of a preservation plan are to (1) **identify** historic resources within the community; (2) **evaluate** their character, significance, and integrity; and (3) **protect** identified resources through the development of programs, methods, tools, and processes for their preservation and continued use.

Webster has undertaken measures to identify historic resources throughout the Town, and some initiatives have been implemented to recognize resources and incorporate them into revitalization efforts, such as listings on the National Register and use of federal and state rehabilitation tax credits for several projects. Additional preservation tools and programs, however, are available as well and could be considered for use. Sections of this Historic Preservation Plan assess the Town's past work in the inventory and recognition of historic

resources and in the initiatives that have been taken for their use and protection.

The practice of historic preservation is well developed and continuously evolving. Historic preservation is based upon the federal and state programs noted below and were first initiated to prevent governmental actions from destroying irreplaceable historic, cultural, and archaeological resources in communities, such as actions that occurred during urban renewal in the 1950s and 1960s. These federal and state programs reach down to the local level to encourage grassroots community preservation action in both the public and private sectors. Most historic preservation occurs through local initiatives such as those contemplated in this preservation plan.

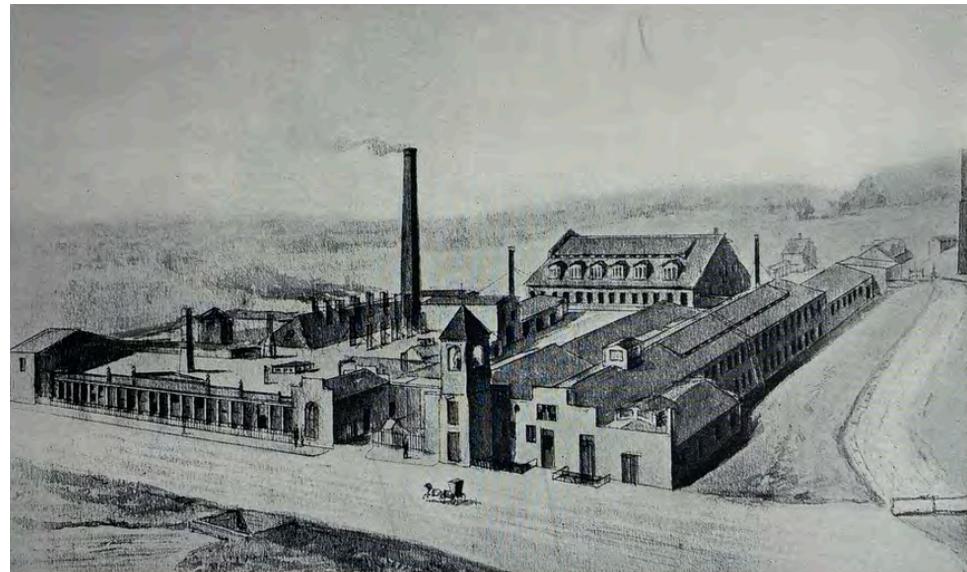


View of the Slater Woolen Mill in South Village in 1876. South Main Street is on the lower right. The Spinning and Carding Mill with the tower on the upper left was built in 1876 and still exists. (Lithographs from *The Slater Mills at Webster*, S. Slater & Sons, 1912)

Preservation can make use of a wide variety of strategies. Most important is the development of the **information** that is necessary to make good decisions, whether in the public or private realms. That is where the identification and evaluation of historic resources comes in. Second is the **communication** of best practices in planning, preservation, conservation, construction, and other areas of activity that enable property owners and the community to assess the best options in the treatment of historic resources. Third is **implementation** of programs and other preservation actions, undertaking and sustaining the measures necessary to achieve the desired goals of historic preservation and enhancement within the community.

The core of any historic preservation plan is the community's historic preservation program. In Webster, this involves the activities of the Town's Historical Commission as well as those of related partners, such as the other Town boards, commissions, and committees as well as private sector businesses and property owners. In Webster, historic preservation should be central to community identity and revitalization efforts.

A broad array of public and private organizations and initiatives are important to the implementation of historic preservation strategies because of their relationships to historic resources as a component of community character and because of their potential impact on historic resources. The broad array of organizations and initiatives is the subject of this Historic Preservation Plan, which takes its cue from historic preservation programs at the national and state levels.



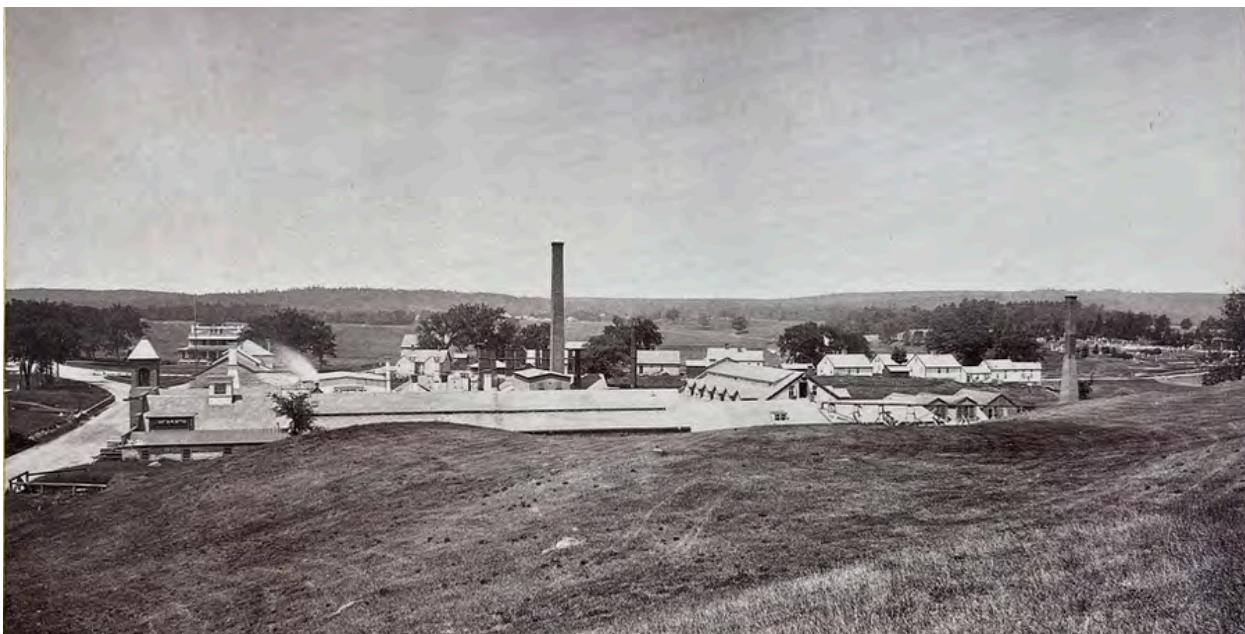
Slater's Cotton Mill in East Village. East Main Street is across the bottom of the drawings. The water supply from Webster Lake is on the right. The tower at center has been preserved. (Slater & Sons: 1912)

NATIONAL AND STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION PROGRAMS

Over the decades, the federal government has established historic preservation programs in recognition of its responsibility to protect historic, cultural, and natural resources on federally owned lands and on other lands where federally funded, permitted, licensed, or sponsored activities are undertaken. Together, these programs have evolved into a comprehensive national historic preservation program. Through example and through a network of nationwide partnerships, the federal government provides leadership, encouragement, and support in the stewardship of historic resources associated with our nation's heritage.

National and state historic preservation programs are outlined in additional detail in Appendix A of this Historic Preservation Plan. The cornerstone of the national program is the *National Historic Preservation Act of 1966*, as amended (NHPA). The NHPA establishes as federal policy that the government will provide leadership in the preservation of historic resources and will administer a national preservation program in partnership with states, federally recognized Native American tribes, and local governments. The National Park Service within the Department of the Interior oversees the NHPA/federal preservation activities.

The NHPA establishes a partnership through which State Historic Preservation Officers (SHPOs) in each state administer the national historic preservation program at the state and local levels. In Massachusetts, the Executive Director of the Massachusetts Historical Commission (MHC) is the Massachusetts SHPO, and the MHC is the State Historic Preservation Office, managing the statewide historic preservation program. Federal funding is provided to support the work of the State Historic Preservation Office through the Historic Preservation Fund, a yearly allocation authorized by Congress in the federal budget.



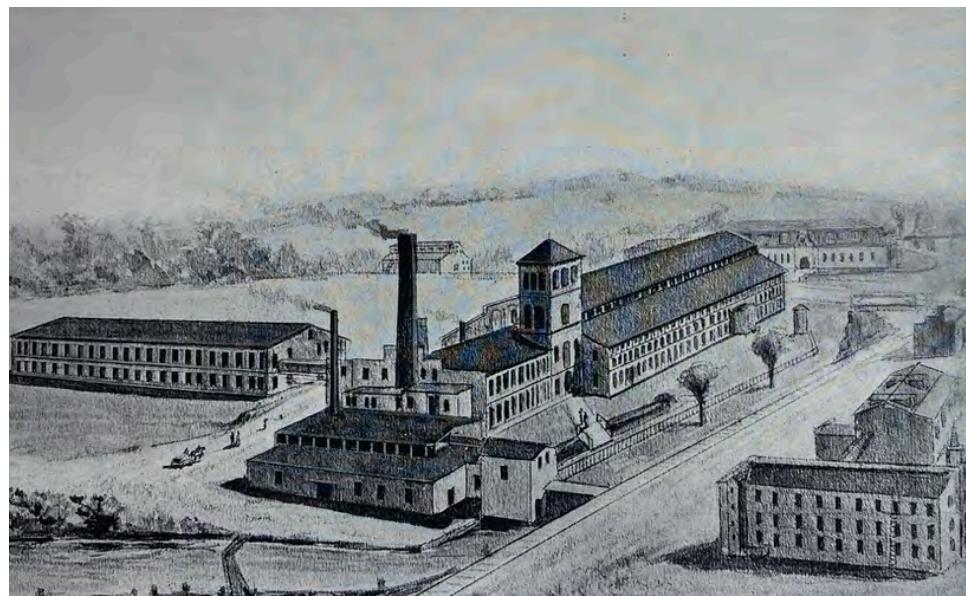
The Cotton Mill in East Village reportedly taken about 1887. This photograph looks west from the vicinity of today's I-395. Main Street is on the left. The tower that has been preserved is visible there. The rest of the mill has been demolished and the site has been redeveloped into a shopping center. (Photos from *Webster Illustrated, Twenty-Eight Views*, undated but photos appear to date to 1887 and later.)

The MHC is the backbone of the national historic preservation program in Massachusetts. It connects the national program to the local level and assures that the program is customized to state and local circumstances and interests in accordance with established national standards.

The MHC manages a number of national level programs in Massachusetts of direct relevance to local communities, including the National Register of Historic Places, the Certified Local Government (CLG) program, federal Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credit program, and environmental compliance for federal and state projects.

Additionally, the MHC manages a set of complementary state level preservation programs, including technical assistance to local communities, planning and project grants, and the state Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credit. The MHC has developed Massachusetts's State Historic Preservation Plan to prioritize and guide preservation partnerships and actions throughout the state. The plan is available online through the MHC website.

Other state level initiatives support historic preservation as well. The Community Preservation Act authorizes local communities to raise local dedicated funds for open space preservation, preservation of historic resources, and other purposes and provides matching state level funds. The Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) has promoted preservation through its early 2000s Historic Landscape Preservation Initiative and other programs. These MHC and DCR programs are discussed further in Appendix A and various relevant chapters of this Historic Preservation Plan.



Slater's Cotton Mill in North Village in 1876 looking north. The mill race, railroad, and Market Street are on the lower right. (Slater & Sons: 1912)

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE – WHAT IS HISTORIC?

At the federal and state levels, eligibility for listing on the National Register of Historic Places is used as the basis for coordinating and supporting public and private efforts to identify, evaluate, and protect historic and archeological resources. Listing or eligibility for listing on the National Register officially recognizes the significance of a historic resource or property.

Resources may be individually listed, be part of a thematic listing, or may be part of a National Register Historic District (as opposed to a local historic district). Resources may include buildings, structures, landscapes, archeological sites, and objects.

To be considered eligible for listing on the National Register, a resource or property must meet the **National Register Criteria for Evaluation**. This involves examining the property's age, significance, and integrity. The Criteria for Evaluation are found in the *Code of Federal Regulations, Title 36, Part 60*, and states:

The quality of significance in American history, architecture, archeology, engineering, and culture is present in districts, sites, buildings, structures,

and objects that possess integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association, and:

- A. That are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history; or*
- B. That are associated with the lives of persons significant in our past; or*
- C. That embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or that represent the work of a master, or that possess high artistic values, or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or*
- D. That have yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.*

The National Park Service has established a process for the review and evaluation of nominations of properties to the National Register in partnership with State Historic Preservation Offices—in Massachusetts, the Massachusetts Historical Commission. Professional staff evaluate each nomination to determine whether it meets the Criteria noted above. In general, a property must be at least 50 years old to be considered for listing on the National Register.



Slater's Cotton Mill in North Village looking to the northwest from Dudley. (Webster Illustrated: undated)

On a local level, properties may be considered historically significant even if they do not qualify for listing on the National Register. The 50-year threshold remains applicable, but the individual property or resource may be relevant to the overall pattern of history or change significant to the community and its landscape, essentially applying Criteria A and C above. In such circumstances, the historical significance of an individual property or resource must be made on

a case-by-case basis and should be the responsibility of the Historical Commission.

Four classifications of local historic resources are suggested:

Class I: Properties listed or eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places including all related contributing resources.

Class II: Properties having high historic value to the Town of Webster but not listed on the National Register.

Class III: Properties of historic value to the Town of Webster but whose historic integrity may have been compromised.

Class IV: Historic sites, archeological sites, landscape structures or features, and ruins of historic interest.

The classification of historic resources is useful in evaluating and determining levels of change appropriate to a resource and for the determination of eligibility of resources for certain incentives that may be available and/or protections that may be provided.



Slater's Woolen Mill in South Village looking to the southeast from Dudley across the French River (in the foreground). The Spinning and Carding Mill with the tower that still survives is on the right. Maps indicate that the large granite and brick mill building at center left was constructed before 1911 and is now demolished, but many site features remain. (Webster Illustrated: undated)

PRESERVATION PRINCIPLES AND APPROACH

The strategies and recommendations outlined in Webster's Communitywide Historic Preservation Plan are informed and guided by the principles of historic preservation that have been developed and honed by practitioners in the field over the decades. Preservation is a practical discipline that can accommodate growth and change while continuing to preserve the characteristics that make a place special. The principles that have been developed in the field of historic preservation, in general, recognize the importance of preserving authentic historic fabric to the maximum extent possible.

Building and landscape uses come and go, but once lost, original historic fabric can never be recovered. The maintenance and preservation of original historic fabric, features, materials, and design elements, therefore, is central to a sound preservation approach. A key objective of this Historic Preservation Plan is to encourage and promote the preservation and maintenance of historic building and landscape fabric through as many different types of endeavors and in as many ways as possible.

Cultural Landscape Context

Webster has intact historic villages that are small-scale urban landscapes associated with the mills which they served. This Historic Preservation Plan urges the adoption of a cultural landscape approach to historic preservation. Every village or neighborhood area in Webster is a part of the Town's overall cultural landscape. Individual historic resources were constructed within larger cultural landscape contexts and patterns of use. Association with those contexts and patterns helps enrich the meaning and significance of individual resources and provides a broader and deeper perspective relative to community character in Webster.

The clues to Webster's past are evident in the cultural landscape and can be in the form of building types; building layouts, relationships and uses; street patterns; remnant cultural features (such as mill sites and mill ruins); as well as their relationships to the natural landscape—topography, the French River, etc. Historic and cultural landscapes are significant to the understanding of Webster's historical development and are the central component of community character. Cultural landscape methodologies and planning tools are therefore important in preservation planning.

The National Park Service has led the recognition and study of cultural landscapes in the United States and has developed methodologies and guidelines for their identification, assessment, and treatment. In general, the identification and analysis of cultural landscape characteristics and features include:

- Spatial organization and land patterns
- Views and vistas
- Topography
- Natural systems and features
- Vegetation
- Circulation

- Land use
- Buildings and structures
- Small-scale features
- Other special considerations

The National Park Service has developed *Guidelines for the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes* which discusses the characteristics outlined above and how to apply the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties* to landscapes. Cultural landscape methodologies and guidelines provide a set of best practices that can help the Town recognize and preserve character defining features of the landscape significant to Webster's character and identity.

Whether considering cultural landscapes or buildings, the principles of historic preservation are embodied in the topic of *Preservation Treatments* and in *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties*, both of which are discussed below.



Caption of the original photo reads: "South side Webster, from Wakefield Tomb" in Dudley. At the center of the photo is the tower of the Spinning and Carding Mill (1876) which still remains. (Webster Illustrated: c.1887)

Preservation Treatments of Structures

The historic preservation field uses a variety of terms to describe the treatments that may be applied to historic buildings and landscapes. Although sometimes these terms are used loosely in discussion, they have specific meanings that are important to distinguish. The four key preservation treatments include: Preservation, Rehabilitation, Restoration, and Reconstruction.

Preservation is defined as the process of applying measures necessary to sustain the existing form, integrity, and materials of an historic property. Work, including preliminary measures to protect and stabilize features, generally focuses on the ongoing maintenance and repair of historic materials and

features. Removals, extensive replacement, alterations, and new additions are not appropriate.

Preservation stresses protection, repair, and maintenance, and is a baseline approach for all historic resources. As the exclusive treatment for a historic property, preservation implies minimal or no change. It is therefore strictly applied only to buildings and resources of extraordinary significance that should not be altered.

In Webster highly significant historic community buildings such as the District Five Schoolhouse and Gothic style Episcopal Church on North Main Street are appropriate for preservation treatment. Remnant mill features throughout the Town, such as mill ruins, raceways, dams, bridges, and the East Village mill tower, should also be preserved.

Rehabilitation is defined as the process of creating a compatible use in a historic property through carefully planned minimal alterations and compatible additions. Often referred to as adaptive reuse, rehabilitation protects and preserves the historic features, materials, elements, and spatial relationships that convey historical, cultural, and architectural values.

Rehabilitation acknowledges the need to alter or add to a property to meet continuing or new uses while retaining historic character. New, expanded, or upgraded facilities should be designed to avoid impacts to historic elements. They should also be constructed of compatible materials. Retention of original historic fabric should be a primary consideration in undertaking a program of rehabilitation and adaptive reuse.

Rehabilitation is perhaps the most important and widely used treatment in the field of historic preservation, particularly in communities that are revitalizing and adapting to new uses. Rehabilitation is the appropriate treatment for Webster's historic village residential buildings, downtown commercial buildings, and other historic buildings and structures.

Restoration refers to returning a resource to its appearance at a specific previous period of its history. Restoration is the process of accurately depicting the form, features, and character of a property as it appeared at a particular time by means of removal of features from other periods in its history and the reconstruction of missing features from the restoration period.

In restoring a property to its appearance in a previous era, historic plans, documents, and photographs should be used to guide the work. Limited and sensitive upgrading of mechanical, electrical, and plumbing systems, as well as code-related work to make a property functional, are all appropriate within a restoration project.

While a commonly used term, restoration is only occasionally used as a preservation treatment. However, property owners should be encouraged to restore their residential buildings within Webster's historic village neighborhoods where the buildings have been inappropriately altered and where historic features have been removed. Restoration of inappropriately

altered historic residences will enhance historic neighborhoods and encourage neighbors to restore the appearances of their homes.

Reconstruction is defined as the process of accurately depicting the form, features, and character of a non-surviving historic property using new construction for the purpose of replicating its appearance at a specific period of time and in its original location. A reconstruction is a new resource made to replace an historic resource that has been lost. Reconstruction is a rarely used preservation treatment applicable primarily in educational and interpretive contexts.

Of these four terms, *Preservation* requires retention of the greatest amount of historic fabric, features, and materials. *Rehabilitation* acknowledges the need to alter or add to a property to meet continuing or new uses while retaining historic character. *Restoration* allows for an accurate depiction of the property's appearance at a particular time in its history. *Reconstruction* establishes a framework for re-creating vanished historic elements with new materials. Preservation and Rehabilitation are the most appropriate and applicable treatments for most historic buildings and landscapes.



Caption of the original photo reads: "Webster, from Brandon Hill." This photo appears to have been taken from the top of the drumlin near the Connecticut border with Lake Street crossing the center of the photo and buildings along East Main Street along the top. (Webster Illustrated: undated)

Authenticity and Integrity

Central to the assessment of historic resources and their potential for change are the concepts of authenticity and integrity. **Authenticity** with respect to a historic building is associated with the preservation of authentic building fabric and features. Authenticity is different from historical appearance. An antique chair has great value because it is the real thing – directly associated with a past time in our history. Once lost, it is irreplaceable. A replica of an antique chair has much less value. If lost, it can easily be replaced.

Similarly, a historic building with authentic features and fabric from its period(s) of historical significance is of higher value than a building with contemporary replacements, replicas, or reconstructions. The preservation of authentic historic building fabric is of primary concern with any historic building.

Integrity relates to the degree to which any individual building retains its authentic building fabric and features. Buildings with high integrity can generally accommodate very little change, while buildings with low integrity can often accommodate a considerable amount of change. In the evaluation of a historic resource, the level of integrity of the historic resource should be assessed. Neighborhood integrity can be assessed with respect to the retention of building and landscape features contributing to its character and setting.

Features of a historic building or landscape that contribute to its significance are termed **character defining features**. For a building, character defining features may include materials such as wood, brick, or stone; built components such as windows, doors, porches, bays, or roofs; or detailing embodied into the design and workmanship. The identification of character defining features is the first step in determining how a resource should be treated.

Authentic building fabric and features that result in a building having high integrity should be preserved to the maximum extent possible. Changes to buildings with low integrity are easier to accommodate. Assessment of authenticity, integrity, and the degree of change that a historic building can accommodate must be made on a case-by-case basis.

Secretary of the Interior's Standards

The philosophy that guides the implementation of recommendations included in this Historic Preservation Plan is based on a set of guidelines entitled *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties*, commonly called the "Secretary of the Interior's Standards" or simply the "Standards."

The *Secretary of the Interior's Standards* were created by historic preservation professionals and have evolved over time to provide guidance in the appropriate treatment of historic resources. The *Standards* were first established by the federal government in 1966 to provide guidelines for the appropriate treatment of buildings and resources impacted by federal projects. Because of their usefulness, they have been adopted throughout the field of historic preservation.

All federally funded and permitted activities affecting historic resources are evaluated with respect to these standards, including for the use of rehabilitation tax credits. The *Standards* were developed specifically to prevent unintended damage to or loss of historic resources by federal actions, such as those that occurred as the result of the wholesale demolition of historic neighborhoods through urban renewal as occurred in urban areas in the 1950s and 60s.

An individual set of standards was developed for each of the four preservation treatments noted above. Just as the treatment of Rehabilitation is appropriate for most projects, the **Standards for Rehabilitation** are applicable to most projects being undertaken for historic buildings and landscapes.

In the language of community planners, *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards* are a list of “best practices” for historic preservation. They are a touchstone for all activities affecting historic buildings and landscapes and help ensure that important issues about the care of historic buildings and landscapes are not forgotten in the process of making decisions about other issues. When the *Standards* are used in the context of a new construction project involving an historic building or landscape, they provide a starting point for the discussion of proposed changes to the building’s or landscape’s historic character and fabric. They were developed to ensure that policies toward historic resources were applied uniformly, even if the end result may be different in every case.



Main Street looking east across the railroad from the vicinity of Chase Avenue. None of the buildings viewed survive today. (Webster Illustrated: c.1887)

All preservation activities, whether they are publicly or privately funded, can be informed, and enhanced by understanding the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards*. Because the *Standards* outline a sensitive approach for assessing changes to historic properties, they are often included in design guidelines, preservation plans, ordinances, and regulations that govern activities affecting local historic districts. These *Standards* articulate basic principles that are fundamental to historic preservation. Although they have been modified over the years to accommodate changing views of historical significance and treatment options, their basic message has remained the same.

The durability of the *Standards* is testimony not only to their soundness, but also to the flexibility of their language. They provide a philosophy and approach to problem solving for those involved in managing the treatment of historic buildings, rather than a set of solutions to specific design issues. Following a balanced, reasonable, and disciplined process is often more important than the exact nature of the treatment option that is chosen. Instead of predetermining an outcome in favor of retaining or recreating historic features, the *Standards* help ensure that the critical issues are considered.

For federal projects and federal agencies, the language of *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties* is codified in 36 CFR Part 68 (the Code of Federal Regulations, Title 36, Parks, Forests and Public

Property, Chapter 1 National Park Service, Department of the Interior, Part 68). A related federal regulation, 36 CFR Part 67, addresses the use of the *Standards* in the certification of projects receiving federal rehabilitation tax credits.

The *Standards* are published by the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, and are available online, including definitions for the four preservation treatments – Preservation, Rehabilitation, Restoration and Reconstruction – as discussed above as well as the individual *Standards* established for each.

The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation are emphasized here because they are particularly useful when considering the appropriate maintenance of historic buildings; the alteration of older buildings as necessary for reuse, safety, and accessibility; and the construction of new buildings in an historic context. The ten standards that comprise the *Standards for Rehabilitation* are quoted below followed by a brief discussion of the implications of each. Additional discussion of the *Standards for Rehabilitation* may also be found online.

STANDARD 1 – *A property will be used as it was historically or be given a new use that requires minimal change to its distinctive materials, features, spaces, and spatial relationships.*

Standard 1 recommends compatible use in the context of adaptive reuse and changes to historic buildings and landscapes. This standard encourages property owners to find uses that retain and enhance historic character, not detract from it. The work involved in reuse projects should be carefully planned to minimize impacts on historic features, materials, and spaces. The destruction of character defining features should be avoided.

STANDARD 2 –*The historic character of a property will be retained and preserved. The removal of distinctive materials or alteration of features, spaces, and spatial relationships that characterize a property will be avoided.*

Standard 2 recommends the retention and preservation of character defining features. It emphasizes the importance of preserving integrity and as much existing historic fabric as possible. Alterations that repair or modify existing historic fabric are preferable to those that require total removal.

STANDARD 3 –*Each property will be recognized as a physical record of its time, place, and use. Changes that create a false sense of historical development, such as adding conjectural features or elements from other historic properties, will not be undertaken.*

Standard 3 focuses on authenticity and discourages the conjectural restoration of an entire property, feature, or design. It also discourages combining and/or grafting historic features and elements from different properties, and constructing new buildings that appear to be historic. Literal restoration to an historic appearance should only be undertaken when detailed documentation is available and when the significance of the resource warrants restoration. Reconstruction of lost features should not be attempted without adequate documentation.

STANDARD 4 – *Changes to a property that have acquired historic significance in their own right will be retained and preserved.*

Standard 4 recognizes that buildings change, and that many of these changes contribute to a building's historical significance. Understanding a building's history and development is just as important as understanding its original design, appearance, and function. This point should be kept in mind when considering treatments for buildings that have undergone many changes.

Most historic buildings contain a visual record of their own evolution. This evolution can be identified, and changes that are significant to the history of the building should be retained. The opportunity to compare multiple periods of time in the same building lends interest to the structure and helps communicate changes that have occurred within the larger landscape and community context.

STANDARD 5 – *Distinctive materials, features, finishes, and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a property will be preserved.*

Standard 5 recommends preserving the distinctive historic components of a building or landscape that represent its historic character. Workmanship, materials, methods of construction, floor plans, and both ornate and typical details should be identified prior to undertaking work.

STANDARD 6 – *Deteriorated historic features will be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature will match the old in design, color, texture, and, where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features will be substantiated by documentary and physical evidence.*

Standard 6 encourages property owners to repair historic character defining features instead of replacing them when historic features are deteriorated or even missing. In cases where deterioration makes replacement necessary, new features should closely match historic conditions in all respects. Before any features are altered or removed, property owners are urged to document existing conditions with photography and notes. These records assist future choices that are appropriate to the property's historic character.

STANDARD 7 – *Chemical or physical treatments, if appropriate, will be undertaken using the gentlest means possible. Treatments that cause damage to historic materials will not be used.*

Standard 7 warns against using chemical and physical treatments that can permanently damage historic features. Many commercially available treatments are irreversibly damaging. Sandblasting and harsh chemical cleaning, in particular, are extremely harmful to wood and masonry surfaces because they destroy the material's basic physical properties and speed deterioration.

STANDARD 8 – *Archeological resources will be protected and preserved in place. If such resources must be disturbed, mitigation measures will be undertaken.*

Standard 8 addresses the importance of below ground prehistoric and historic features. This issue is of most importance when a construction project involves

excavation. An assessment of a site's archeological potential prior to work is recommended. If archeological resources are present, some type of mitigation should be considered. Solutions should be developed that minimize the need for excavation of previously unexcavated sites.

STANDARD 9 – *New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction will not destroy historic materials, features, and spatial relationships that characterize the property. The new work shall be differentiated from the old and will be compatible with the historic materials, features, size, scale and proportion, and massing to protect the integrity of the property and its environment.*

STANDARD 10 – *New additions and adjacent or related new construction will be undertaken in such a manner that, if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.*

Standards 9 and 10 are linked by issues of the compatibility and reversibility of additions, alterations, and new construction. Both standards are intended to 1) minimize the damage to historic fabric caused by building additions, and 2) ensure that new work will be different from, but compatible with, existing historic conditions. Following these standards will help to protect a building's historic integrity.

In conclusion, the basis for the *Standards* is the premise that historic resources are more than objects of aesthetic merit—they are repositories of historical information. It is important to reiterate that the *Standards* provide a framework for evaluating preservation activities and emphasize preservation of historic fabric, honesty of historical expression, and reversibility. All decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis. The level of craftsmanship, detailing, and quality of materials should be appropriate to the significance of the resource.



**Church of the Reconciliation on North Main Street in South Village built in 1870.
(Webster Illustrated: c.1887)**

Conclusion

Preservation planning is the means through which a coordinated long-term program of historic preservation action may continue to be implemented in Webster. It emphasizes the continued identification of historic resources, evaluation of their significance and integrity, and protection through appropriate tools and techniques.

Historic preservation is primarily a product of local community initiatives fostered by many decades of interest and effort by private citizens. Over the past fifty years, federal, state, and local governments have established a framework that aids and encourages local community preservation efforts. The Town of Webster has the opportunity to take significant steps in using preservation planning tools and methodologies in documenting and preserving its significant historic building and landscape resources.

This Preservation Plan seeks to incorporate preservation planning concepts and methodologies into Webster's long-term revitalization and growth management strategies and processes. It seeks ways to continue accommodating growth and change while preserving and enhancing historic building and landscape resources.



The Rock Castle School on Prospect Street constructed in 1871, Webster's original high school. (Webster Illustrated: c.1887)



CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND RESOURCES

Historic contexts are those patterns or trends in history by which a specific occurrence, property, or site can be understood and its meaning within history or prehistory made clear. Webster's physical evolution can be tied to a series of historic contexts involving natural, economic, and social patterns at local, regional, and national levels.

In the 1970s and 80s, the Massachusetts Historic Commission (MHC) undertook a comprehensive, interdisciplinary assessment of the Commonwealth's cultural resources. Using a cultural landscape approach, Massachusetts was divided into eight regions (or study units) for which it was intended that broad-based regional reports be prepared to include discussions of geography and landscape; prehistory; patterns of settlement during successive periods of historical development; and examinations of architecture, economy, and material culture.

Five of the intended eight regional studies were completed between 1982 and 1985 and established a comprehensive, reconnaissance level overview of the development of each region. A study for the Central Massachusetts region was completed in 1985 and included the Blackstone, French, and Quinebaug River

watersheds in the southern portion of the state along the border with Connecticut, including the towns of Webster, Dudley, and Douglas.

This statewide approach provided the basis for the preparation of more detailed *Reconnaissance Survey Town Reports* for every municipality in Massachusetts. These Town Reports were prepared between 1979 and 1987 and have provided valuable insight and context for history and preservation planning for municipalities statewide.

The Town Report prepared for Webster was completed in 1983 and is abbreviated in its length and scope. The report provides a very general overview of Webster's historical development in relation to the statewide historic contexts outlined for the regional studies. The statewide contexts or periods remain in general use and include:

- Prehistoric Period (before 1500)
- Contact Period (1500-1620)
- Plantation Period (1620-1675)
- Colonial Period (1675-1775)
- Federal Period (1775-1830)
- Early Industrial Period (1830-1870)
- Late Industrial Period (1870-1915)
- Early Modern Period (1915-1940)

The Survey Report prepared for Webster in 2000 provides a similar and somewhat more fulsome overview of the Town's physical development. Discussed in relation to Webster's Historic Properties Inventory, the full title is *Final Report, Comprehensive Community-wide Survey, Webster, Massachusetts, June 30, 2000* by Heli Meltsner. The 2000 Survey Report discussed the economy, settlement patterns, development, and architecture of the Town during each period, focusing on the historic mill villages.

Additional available sources include the centennial publication prepared by S. Slater and Sons prepared in 1912 titled *The Slater Mills at Webster* and commemorating the Slater family's 100th year since establishing its mill operations in Webster. Barbara Tucker's 1984 book, *Samuel Slater and the origins of the American Textile Industry, 1790-1860*, provides an insightful overview of the operations, development, and significance of Samuel Slater and his family's initiative.

Together, these sources provide a good context for appreciation of the Slater's mill development and the history of Webster. They are not, however, sufficient in presenting the fully history of the Town and details of the Slater's operations in Webster. A full history of the Slater family and the Town of Webster is needed.

RECOMMENDATION 2.A: Prepare a history of Webster detailing the town's mill history as led by Samuel Slater and his family and its significance to the region and the nation. Include Dudley's mills. Priority three recommendation to be led by the Webster Historical Commission and Webster-Dudley Historical Society.

The following discussion of Webster's historical development and historic contexts is based upon the sources noted above and supplemented with information derived from historic maps and other histories. As with the 1983 Town Report and 2000 Survey Report, this discussion is abbreviated and does not provide the level of research or detail that would be desirable through more intensive study.

The discussion below seeks to provide some insights into Webster's historical development and poses some questions that might be explored through more intensive studies. It uses the statewide historic contexts or periods from the statewide framework for resource management for its organizational structure even though Webster's history is more exclusively mill related in nature.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT

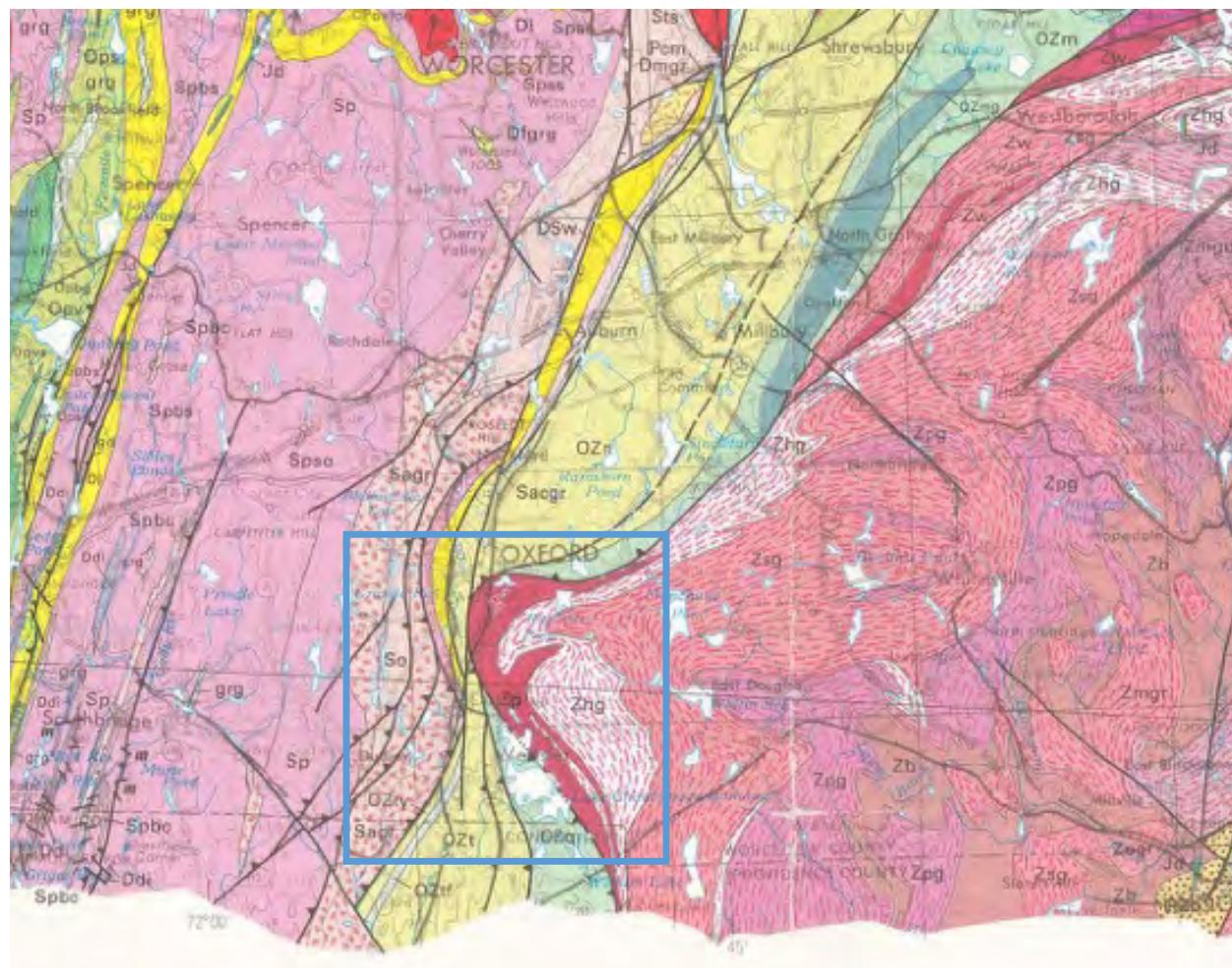
Webster is located in the central uplands portion of Massachusetts known as the Worcester Plateau, which separates the coastal lowlands to the east from the Connecticut River Valley to the west. Characterized by rugged terrain and deeply dissected by numerous watercourses, the region is classified as a plateau because of the general uniformity in elevation of its ridge tops and undissected surfaces.

The bedrock foundation of the Worcester Plateau consists of several north-south oriented bands of igneous and metamorphic rocks. Webster is positioned at a significant location between two of these bands, with a fault line known as the Lake Char Fault separating dense metamorphic granite and quartzite of the Milford-Dedham Zone to the east from the schist, gneiss, and marble of the Nashoba Zone to the west.

The southern portion of the Worcester Plateau in the vicinity of Webster and Dudley is drained by the French and Quinebaug rivers, which are part of the Thames River Drainage flowing south through Connecticut to Long Island Sound. The French River flows south from its headwaters in the Leicester area through Webster, where it drains Webster Lake (Lake Chaubunagungamaug). After leaving Worcester County at the Connecticut border it joins the Quinebaug River near Putnam, Connecticut.

The Massachusetts landscape was shaped by glaciers, and land use both in Native American eras and in post-European settlement periods was directly influenced by the character of the glacial landscape and the uses to which it could be put.

The last of the Wisconsin era glaciers to advance and retreat across New England was known as the Laurentide ice sheet and began its retreat about 12,000 years ago. As it retreated, the ice sheet left a landscape of low but varied relief with hills formed as moraines, till, and as glacial outwash. Their soils range in their degree of stoniness based upon the conditions of their formation, but they are mostly mixed rocks, stones, and sands of varying size. Low lying areas were lake bottoms or river courses of silt, and many areas do not drain well or at all. There are numerous swamps and kettle holes, as well as round-topped hills, and the terrain can be unpredictable.



Detail of a geological map of south-central Massachusetts. The vicinity of Webster is shown within the blue rectangle. The reddish formations to the east of Webster Lake are dense granite rocks of the Milford-Dedham Zone. The green and yellow formations to the west of the lake are less dense schists, gneiss, and marbles of the Nashoba Zone. The French River is also a dividing line between two of the Nashoba rock formations. (USGS; Bedrock Map of Massachusetts; E-an Zen, Editor; 1983)

The glacial deposits are divided into two broad categories, ***Glacial Till and Moraine Deposits*** and ***Glacial Stratified Deposits***. Till, the most widespread glacial deposit, was laid down directly by glacier ice. Glacial stratified deposits are concentrated in valleys and lowland areas and were laid down by glacial meltwater in streams, lakes, and the sea in front of the retreating ice margin during the last deglaciation. ***Postglacial Deposits***, primarily flood-plain alluvium and swamp deposits make up a lesser proportion of the unconsolidated materials.

The Surficial Materials Map of Webster area published by the Massachusetts Geological Survey on the page opposite shows the Town's glacial landscape in detail.



Surficial Materials Map of the Webster (left) and Oxford (right) Quadrangles (Scientific Investigation Map 3402, Quadrangle 76 Webster and 82 Oxford; Massachusetts Geological Survey 2018)

Areas of Exposed Bedrock

Much of the landscape of south-central Massachusetts has bedrock close to the surface, with little or no glacial deposits. Areas shown in solid red on the Surface Materials Map are exposed bedrock. Areas shown in horizontal red lines are bedrock with a shallow covering of soil.

As mentioned above, the Town of Webster is divided by a major fault along the east side of Webster Lake. To the east of the fault, the surface topography is primarily shallow bedrock of the Milford-Dedham Zone, with minimal cover of glacial deposits. Historically this high, rocky landscape was an impediment to east-west transit in both pre- and post-European settlement periods. Soils in this area of eastern Webster were not conducive to agricultural use. Today, it is mostly conservation land known as the Douglas Woods.

To the west of the fault, are surface deposits of glacial till and alluvium, though here too there are areas of exposed or shallow bedrock, in this case of the Nashoba Zone. These areas, however, are located west of the French River, outside of Webster.

Areas of Glacial Till

The Glacial Till laid down directly by the glacier ice is shown on the surface geology map opposite in green shades and are predominate in the landscapes in areas that are not bedrock.

The *very light shade of green* on the Surface Materials Map depicts **Thin Till** which is generally less than 10 to 15 feet thick and may be laid over areas of shallow bedrock with occasional outcroppings. Areas of Thin Till are located between Webster Lake and the French River, including beneath much of the historic village.

The *darker shade of green* on the map depicts **Thick Till**, a non-sorted, non-stratified matrix of sand, silt, and a little clay containing scattered pebbles, cobbles, and boulders. Areas identified as Thick Till are greater than 10 to 15 feet in thickness and are mostly drumlin landforms in which the till thickness commonly exceeds 100 feet. Small areas of Thick Till are present in Webster, including Sugarloaf Hill to the east of the lake just above Route 16, and the Park Road/Summit Street area west of Thompson Road in the historic village.

In general, historic road alignments avoid the higher elevations of Glacial Till. The drumlins of Thick Till are usually not suitable for cultivation due to their steep slopes. They may have been most suitable as woodlots. Areas of Thin Till were also less desirable for cultivation due to the shallow bedrock. They may have been used mostly as pasture and woodlots. Study of the historic layout of early farm properties and field lines might provide insight on how these lands were used agriculturally.

Glacial Stratified Deposits

The Glacial Stratified Deposits laid down by the glacial meltwaters in front of the retreating ice margin are shown in the map opposite in orange and blue and are found around Webster Lake and within the French River Valley.

Areas shown in *orange* are termed **Coarse Deposits** and consist of gravel, sand and gravel, and sand. Coarse Deposits may have been favored for agricultural uses due to their moderate slopes and their depth. In Webster, Coarse Deposits are present along the shores of Webster Lake, east-west in a band connecting East Village to North Village, and north-south in the valley of the French River.

Postglacial Deposits

Postglacial Deposits are shown in *yellow* on the surface geology map and show narrow bands of **Flood Plain Alluvium** within the floodplain of the French River and within broader areas of Coarse Deposits.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

The lifeways of indigenous cultures extending from the retreat of glaciers some 12,000 years ago to the Contact Period with European cultures about 500 years ago is closely associated with the character of region's glaciated landscape and the wildlife and plant communities it supported.

Overviews of the history of indigenous peoples in Central Massachusetts are provided in a variety of technical publications based on the findings of archaeological investigations.

Archaeologists divide indigenous history into three broad periods, the Paleoindian Period (11,000-8,000 BP), Archaic Period (9,000-2,500 BP), and Woodland Period (2,600-500 BP) based upon changes in lifeways as evidenced through archaeological research. The Archaic Period is further subdivided into Early, Middle, Late, and Transitional periods, while the Woodland Period is subdivided into Early, Middle, and Late periods.

Over this extensive timeframe, indigenous cultures evolved from small, widely spread populations practicing diversified hunting and gathering to more intricate and intensive population distribution with ranges in site sizes and internal complexity based upon site usage.

Late Archaic cultural complexes (4,500-3,000 BP) show the greatest frequency and widest distribution in different environmental zones within Eastern and Central Massachusetts. During this period indigenous peoples utilized the habitats within the region, with diverse tool assemblages and relatively large population densities. This intense use of resources in the region appears to continue into the Transitional Archaic Period (3,600-2,500 BP) and the Woodland Periods.

By the Late Woodland (1,000-500 BP), horticulture of local domesticated plants intensified and neighbors to the south and west introduced maize horticulture. People lived in larger groups, and sometimes in fortified villages. During this period, complex political alliances emerged, perhaps reflecting an increase in sedentary lifestyle and population growth. An approximate dividing line exists between the territories of the coastal tribes, primarily the Massachusett, and the inland tribes of Central Massachusetts, primarily the Nipmuck. Inland groups may have continued a more mobile hunting and gathering subsistence strategy than their coastal neighbors.

In the period before contact with Europeans, the vicinity of what is now Webster had been a seasonal hunting ground of the Nipmuck tribe. Webster Lake (Lake Chaubunagungamaug) is believed to have been an early gathering point for several tribes in the region including the Nipmuck, Mohegan, Pequots, and Narragansetts. Translation of the Native American name

Chaubunagungamaug is thought to mean “boundary fishing place.” The lake is situated at a crossing point of several Native American paths: the Old Connecticut, Nipmuck, Mohegan, Narragansett, and Mendon Paths. The vicinity has a high potential for Native American sites. The Hassanamisco Nipmuck Band is state-recognized in Massachusetts and has a reservation in Grafton.

Better understanding and presentation of the history of Native American peoples in the vicinity of Webster, the French River, and Webster Lake is needed. Preparation of a history or archeological reconnaissance survey of Native Americans in the region, particularly the Nipmuck, is recommended. The survey should examine the relationships of the peoples to the region’s natural landscape.

The survey would include examination of previous archaeological studies from within the region, review of identified archaeological sites and resource findings, and could include preparation of an archaeological sensitive map that might be predictive of the potential for finding future sites and would be useful in future planning. The survey would use the Surficial Materials Map of the Town reproduced above as a starting point for understanding of the regional ecology and its use by indigenous peoples.

RECOMMENDATION 2.B: Prepare an archeological reconnaissance survey of indigenous peoples in south-central Massachusetts and the Nipmuck in particular. Focus on the relationship to Webster Lake and the French River Valley. Priority three recommendation to be led by the Webster Historical Commission and Webster-Dudley Historical Society.

CONTACT PERIOD (1500-1620); PLANTATION PERIOD (1620-1675); AND COLONIAL PERIOD (1675-1775)

No settlement by Europeans is known within the vicinity of Webster during the Contact or Plantation Periods, prior to 1675. The region appears to have continued to have been a seasonal hunting grounds, fishing site, and gathering place. In 1672, John Eliot established a village of “praying Indians” at the head of the lake, which was described as a settlement of “sober deportment.”

King Philip’s War of 1675 disrupted the course of events within the region. Nipmuck peoples remaining in the area sold their land in the area to English settlers in 1681 but retained a reservation fifty miles long and twenty miles wide extending from the lake west to today’s Dudley Center.

Between 1707 and 1797, the Nipmuck sold off most of their holdings until only a twenty-six acre area remained. This reservation was located in the hilly and boggy area west of today’s School and Ash Streets, east of Lake Street, south of George Street, and north of the Connecticut border. It was noted as “Nipmuck Indians” on maps as late as 1870. Perhaps because of this development constraint, the area south of Park and east of Crosby Streets was still largely undeveloped until the last quarter of the 19th century. (Meltsner 2000)

Colonial settlement began with a group of French Huguenots at a site in Oxford in 1686, which was subject to repeated attack by Native Americans and was

abandoned in 1704. Oxford was resettled beginning in 1713. A meetinghouse was constructed in 1717, and dispersed 18th century agricultural settlement occurred on the river's alluvial soils. Settlement was initiated in Dudley following incorporation of the Town in 1731.

Little information is available about early settlement in the region, but it appears to have included dispersed farms possibly supplemented by grist and sawmills on the French River and fishing in Webster Lake. The poor soils of the region were not an attraction for intense agricultural development by European settlers.

FEDERAL PERIOD (1775-1830)

The physical development of the landscape that would later become Webster appears to have changed little during the early Federal Period between 1775 and 1810, with dispersed farmsteads on the better sandy and alluvial soils along the French River and north and west of Webster Lake, and little settlement activity on the poor upland glacial till soils elsewhere.

As noted above, the Town of Oxford, which included the lands east and north of Webster Lake, was permanently settled beginning in 1713 with its center north of the area, and the Town of Dudley, which included the area between the French River and the lake, was incorporated in 1731 with its center west of the area.

A grist and sawmill owned by the Robinson family and later the Bartlett family are indicated on a 1795 map at the falls of the French River at what is now North Village. Historians report that a small textile mill was also established in this vicinity in 1810.

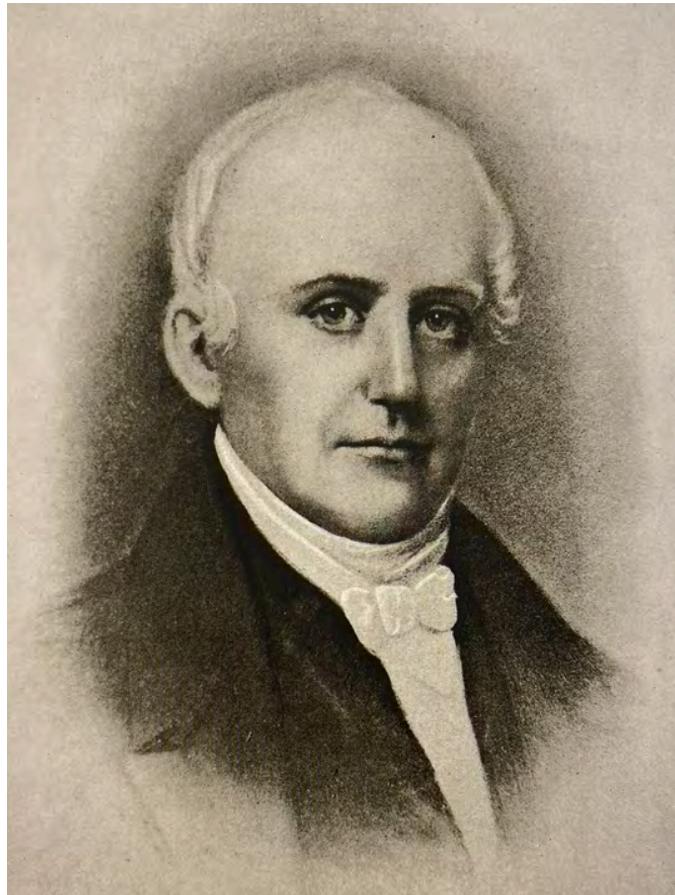
A second group of industrial buildings were constructed at the head of Webster Lake in what later became East Village. About 1798, Phili Brown and John Healy purchased part of the Asa Robinson farm at the head of the lake, including a saw and grist mill. They opened a water-operated foundry on the site, smelting bog iron found along Mine Brook on the east side of the lake. In 1805 the business closed and the land was sold. A small mill company attempted a cotton mill on the site about 1810 but failed soon afterwards. (Meltsner 2000)

In 1811, Samuel Slater purchased the old Robinson farmhouse, barn, grist and sawmills, and nine and one-half acres of land at the north end of the lake, and in 1812 Slater and his partner, Bela Tiffany, erected a mill to produce cotton yarn at the site.

Samuel Slater is known as the “Father of American Textile Manufacturing” and “Father of the American Industrial Revolution” for his role in introducing into this country the carefully guarded textile machinery invented in England. Slater adapted and refined the machinery so that it was more efficient and introduced management practices appropriate to the rural American context.

Having been trained in England, Slater emigrated to New York in 1789 and offered his services to Moses Brown and family in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, for construction of a modern textile mill in the English manner. Between 1790 and

1973, Slater and Brown opened the first successful water-powered roller spinning textile mill in the United States. In 1798, Slater formed Samuel Slater and Company and began developing other mills in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island.



Drawing of Samuel Slater from the company's 1912 commemorative publication *The Slater Mills at Webster*.

In 1811, Slater directed his attention to the area known as the Oxford South Gore that would later become Webster, drawn by the available waterpower at Lake Webster and available labor from surrounding farms. Slater & Tiffany's cotton mill at the head of Webster Lake was the beginning of an extensive manufacturing operation that became East Village.

The War of 1812 spurred America's textile industry. Slater focused his manufacturing efforts in East Village, converting the former Robinson farmhouse into his personal home. The cotton mill was followed by construction of a dye-works in 1813 and, in 1815, construction of a small woolen mill in partnership with Edward Howard for the manufacture of broadcloths and other similar woolens. In 1818, Slater became the sole owner of the cotton mill operation.

East Village was developed as an almost self-sufficient company town within the broad rural landscape, an entire new community with mill facilities, housing, stores, and social institutions. Slater hired whole families, including children, to

work his operations. Housing was constructed adjacent to the mill along existing roads. While men worked in the mill, women wove the mill-spun yarn into cloth at home.

Between 1812 and 1831, about twenty-eight to thirty buildings were constructed in East Village aside from the mill complex, many of them company-built worker housing. The company bought surrounding farms, essentially connecting their holdings between East Village and North Village. They farmed areas of the land; turned much to industrial, commercial, and housing use; and retained the rest as undeveloped acreage. Garden plots were provided for mill cottages. Large mill-owned farms, a slaughterhouse, and barns were constructed to help provide for the company town.

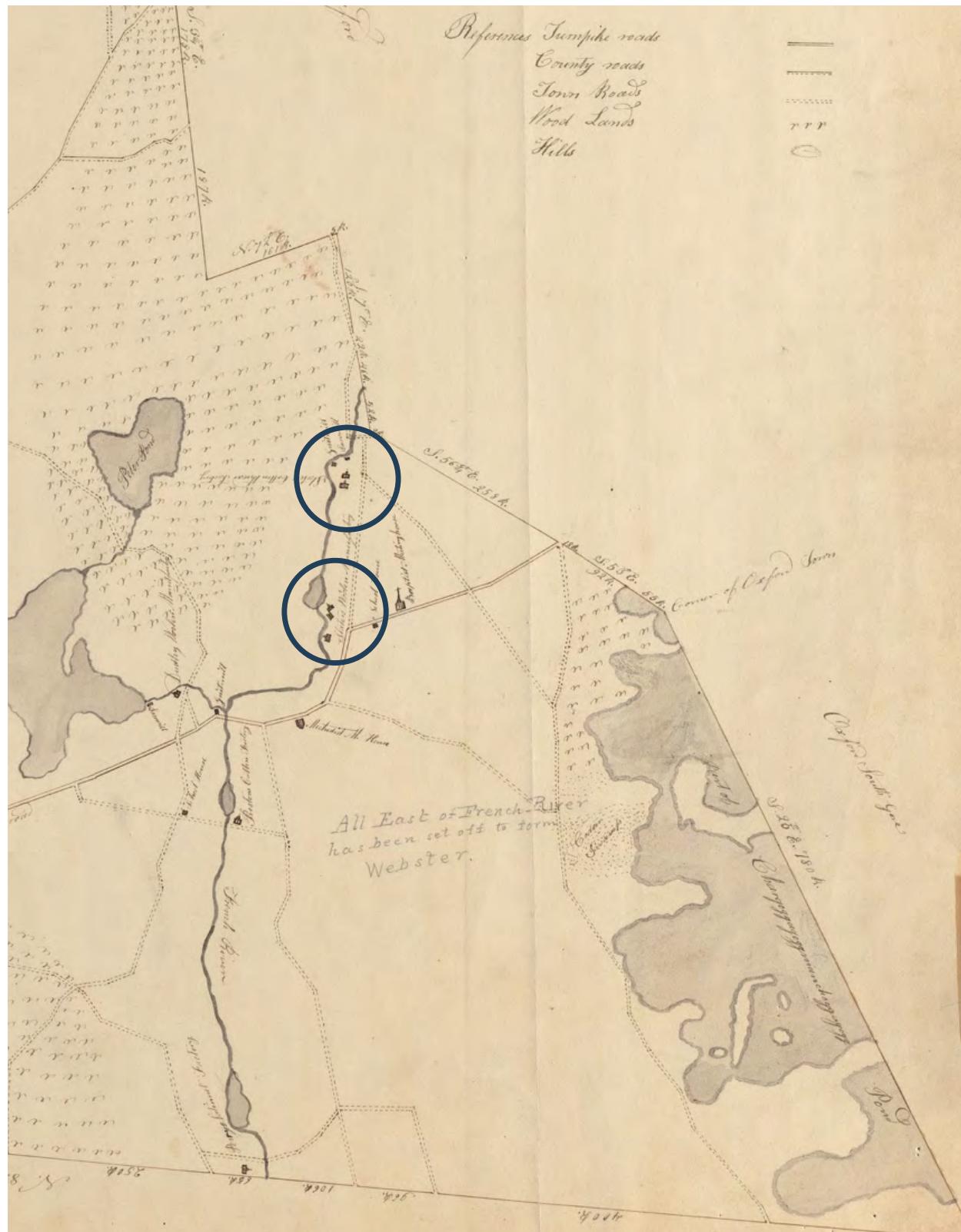
The small woolen mill in East Village burned in 1820, and Slater & Howard purchased a water privilege on the French River in what would become South Village. There, they constructed a larger woolen mill in 1821/22. Slater and Howard purchased acres of land in the vicinity and constructed a dam, canal, and factory on the mill site; worker housing on South Main and Prospect Streets; and a manager's house on East Main Street.

In 1824, Slater & Howard purchased the failed 1810 mill in North Village to expand their cotton spinning operations. Slater & Howard expanded the mill and worker related facilities in the village. Slater acquired his partner Edward Howard's interest in the company in 1829 and restructured it as Samuel Slater & Sons in association with his sons George, John, and Horatio.

East Village, North Village, and South Village continued to grow and are representative of the company town model of rural textile mill development in New England. Most goods were sold in New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Charleston. By 1832, the East Village mill employed 43 men, women, and children; the North Village mills employed 150; and the South Village mills about 130. Each village, however, remained small and independent within the broader rural landscape, with the related built areas of each village not connecting to each other. Descriptions and analysis in Meltner's 2000 Survey for Webster identify buildings related to the early pre-1832 development of the three mill villages.



This photograph of East Village, probably taken in 1887, shows how isolated and self-contained the village was within the rural landscape even at that late date. The photo is taken from the vicinity of today's I-395.



Detail of the 1831 Plan of Dudley by Zephaniah Keach showing the eastern portion of the town that shortly later was ceded to become the west side of Webster. The blue circles show the locations of North Village and South Village. Note the lake and adjacent patterned areas of trees and cedar swamp.



Detail of the 1830 Plan of Oxford by Sylvester McIntyre showing the southern portion of the town that shortly later was ceded to become east side of Webster. The blue circle shows the location of East Village. Note the lake and large patterned areas of trees to the east.



East Village, Company Store – 1815



South Village, Company Overseer's House – 1828



South Village, Double Worker Housing – 1822



North Village, George Slater House – 1827



North Village, Company Worker Housing – 1825



North Village, Double Worker Housing – 1825

Examples of historic buildings dating to Samuel Slater's pre-1832, East, South, North Villages.

EARLY INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1830-1870)

Webster's early industrial period really occurred between 1811 and 1830, during which period the rural village company town model of textile manufacturing Samuel Slater became famous for was established and thrived. During the following period of Massachusetts history, 1830 to 1870, the Slater enterprises transitioned from the early traditional concepts of patriarchalism to a new national model of competitive capitalism under which both Slater and Sons and the Town of Webster grew and thrived.

Author Barbara Tucker describes Slater's early traditional village company town model in her book *Samuel Slater and the Origins of the American Textile Industry 1790-1860*, cited earlier in this chapter. She also describes the transition to a new national model of competitive capitalism through which Slater enterprises grew and thrived.

During his lifetime, Samuel Slater acquired a variety of mills and other enterprises located in several states that grew in an uncoordinated manner. The economic downturn of 1829 caused Slater to reevaluate his businesses. He bought out his partner, Edward Howard; formed a new family partnership, Slater and Sons; and brought in his three sons, George, John, and Horatio, to manage the operations.

Confident, competent businessmen, the three sons were willing to break with tradition and move the family business into the mainstream of 19th century American industrial development. Under their direction, the organization and business policies instituted by their father came under immediate and thorough review and overhaul. Intense competition, principally from Britain, caused the Slatters to cut costs, implement organizational changes, and become more innovative, pursuing a policy of continuous change.

The three brothers sold some factories and consolidated or enlarged others. They focused their interests in Webster, streamlining their operations there. The three woolen factories were reorganized as the Webster Woolen Company in 1847, and three years later the four cotton mills were consolidated into Union Mills. Both the Webster Woolen Company and Union Mills were owned exclusively by Samuel Slater and Sons, a closed family partnership. The factories in Webster were enlarged in 1852, 1861, and 1865.

Horatio Slater became the chief architect of the reorganization. Samuel Slater died in 1832, John Slater died in 1838, and George Slater died in 1843, leaving management of the family business exclusively to Horatio. His leadership lasted four decades during which the firm prospered and became one of the leading manufacturing companies in the United States.

Several factors contributed to change in the Webster mills. First, the Town of Webster was incorporated in 1832 around the Slater operations. The Slater family and its business associates organized the residents and prevailed upon the legislature for a town essentially constructed around the Slater properties, with the addition of farmland and woodlands east of the lake and south of South Village.

Second was the opening of the Norwich and Worcester Railroad in 1840. Chartered in Connecticut in 1832 and in Massachusetts in 1833, the railroad connected Norwich, CT at the head of the Thames River with Worcester, which was becoming a statewide transportation hub. Running up the French River Valley in Webster, the railroad connected North and South Villages to the emerging national transportation network. An additional railroad, the Southbridge Branch of the Boston, Hartford, and Erie Railroad, was constructed west of the lake to Depot Village by 1865.

Third was the gradual replacement of native-born labor in the Webster mills with immigrants during the 1840s and 1850s, principally Irish and French Canadians at first, followed by other national and ethnic groups later. With continued growth of the mills, the change resulted in the construction of new housing and the introduction of ethnic enclaves that characterized residential patterns in late 19th century and early 20th century Webster.

The Early Industrial Period was a time of growth for Webster. The Town's population rose from 1,400 in 1840, to 2,361 in 1850, to 2,912 in 1860, to 4,763 in 1870. A diversification of industry in Webster at mid-century produced plenty of new jobs for the growing population.

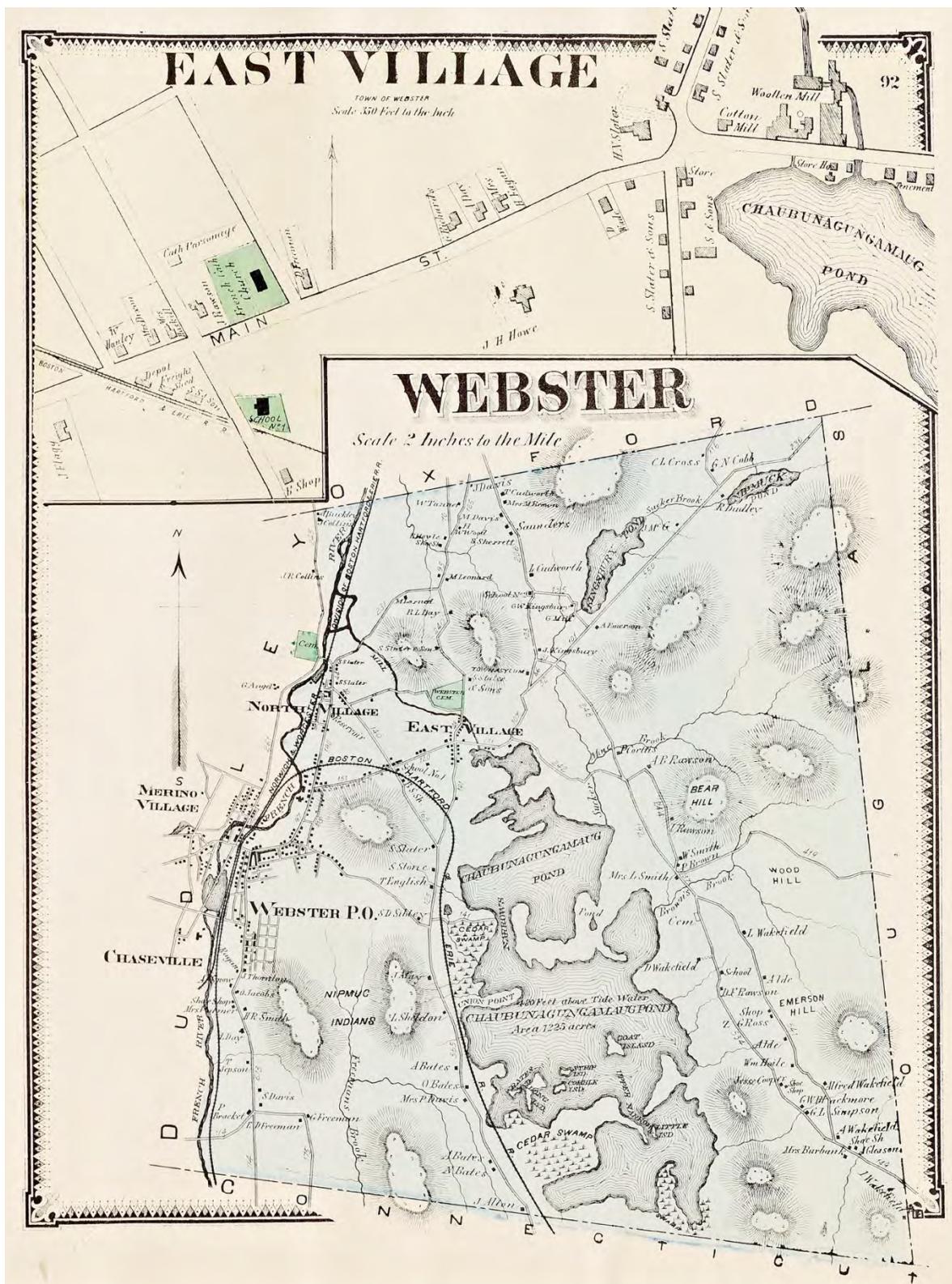
The three mill villages expanded, but remained separate concentrations amid the broader rural landscape, as depicted in the Town's 1870 maps. A new center emerged at the railroad's intersection with Main Street, which became known as Depot Village and eventually grew into Downtown Webster.

Residential areas around the three mill sites expanded with new tenement housing types to accommodate the growing workforce. Near the factories the company built forty-five new block-style tenements, each of which accommodated from four to ten households. Built side by side along the village roads, these tenements preserved little of the appearance or rural character of the dwellings the company had constructed in the 1820s and 1830s.

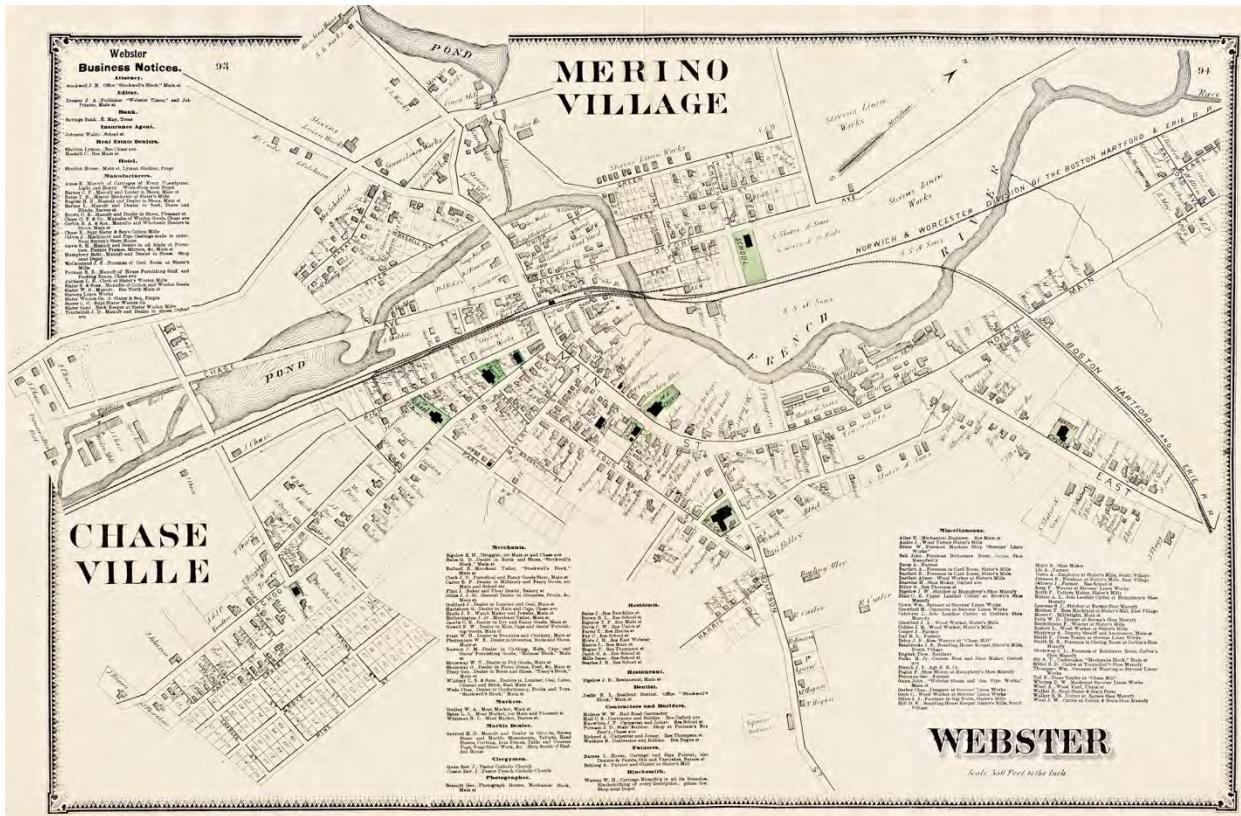
These small, two-story wooden structures averaged about 28 feet by 39 feet for a three- or four-room tenement. They had fewer rooms and windows and less floor and storage space than earlier dwellings, and they provided almost no land for individual household gardens.

This growth can most clearly be seen in North Village, where most of the mid-to-late 19th century housing survives. These resources, though somewhat altered, are a superb record of Webster's built environment during this period. Much of the housing built during this period in South Village, and most of the housing in East Village, has been demolished.

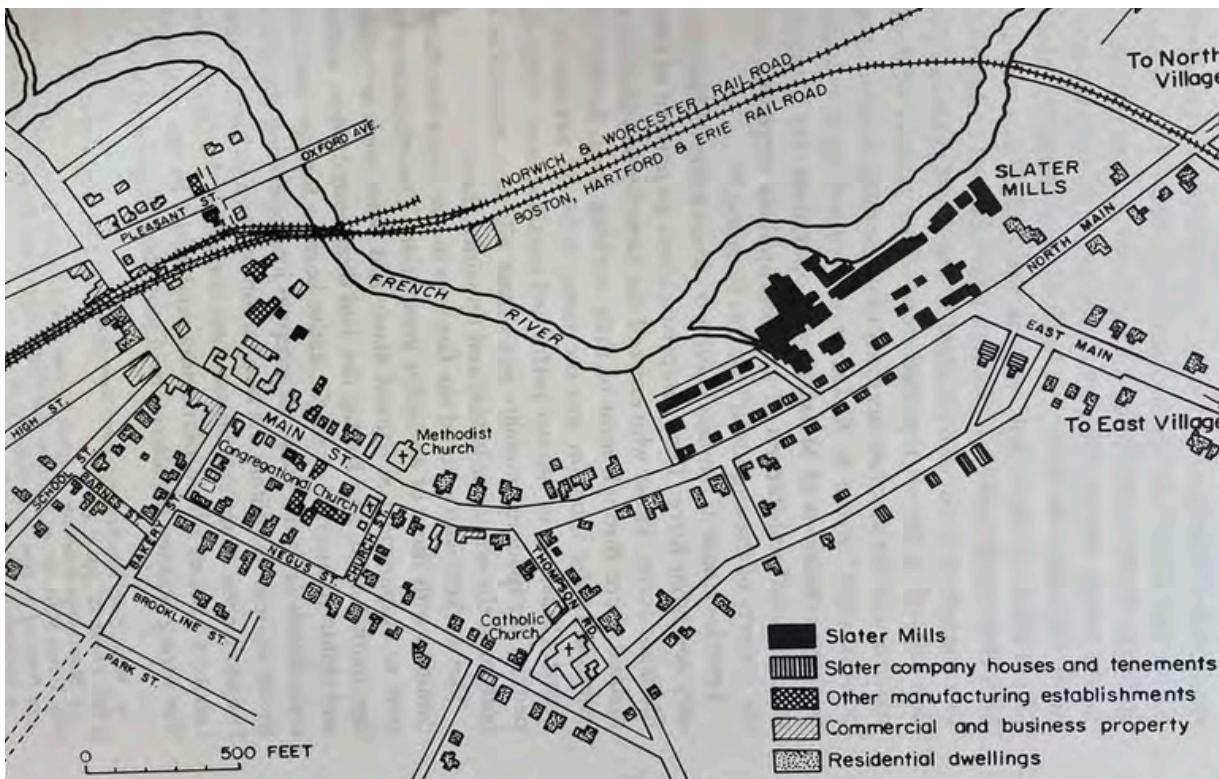
Along North Main and Pearl Streets, few trees or open spaces interrupted the long rows of tenements. Most of these new units were built in clusters either next to or directly across from the factory. Physically, these tenements and the factory now formed a unit distinct from the central village. The immigrant community was isolated from the native-born commercial and residential sectors of town.



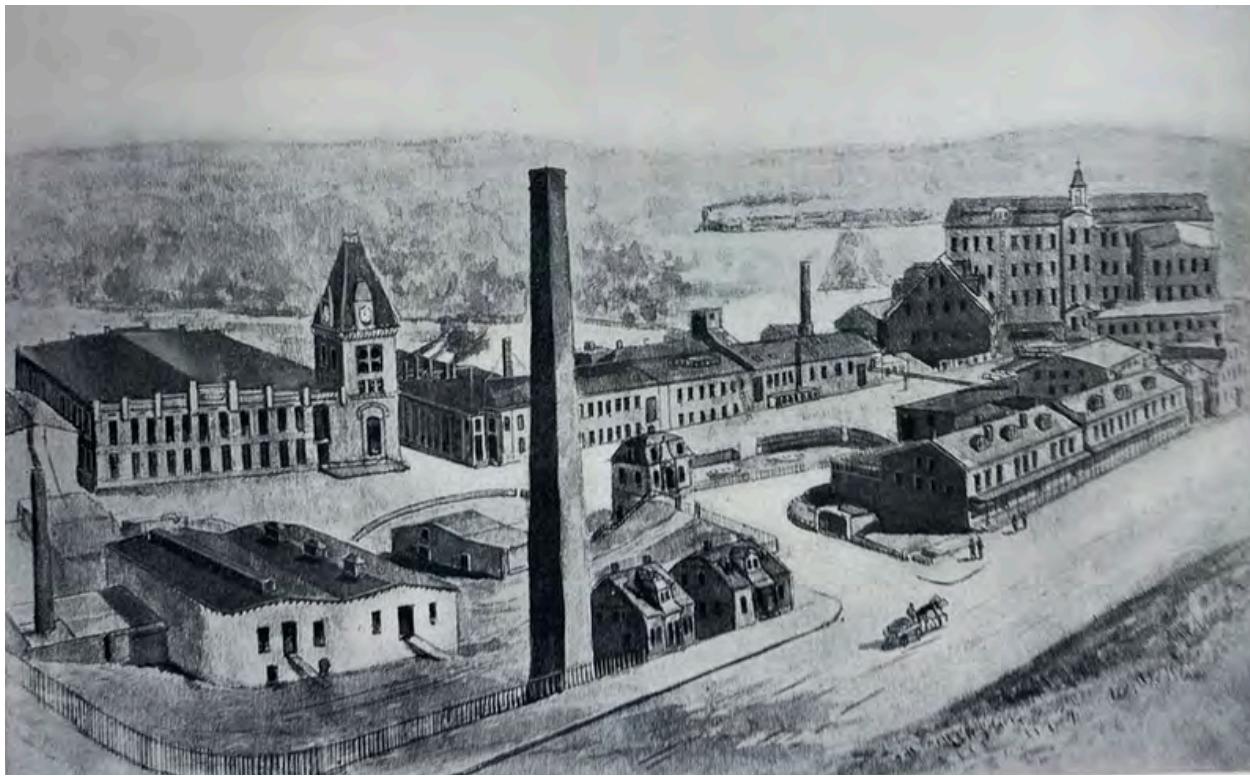
Beers Atlas of 1870 showing the limited extent of development in Webster and a detailed plan of East Village.



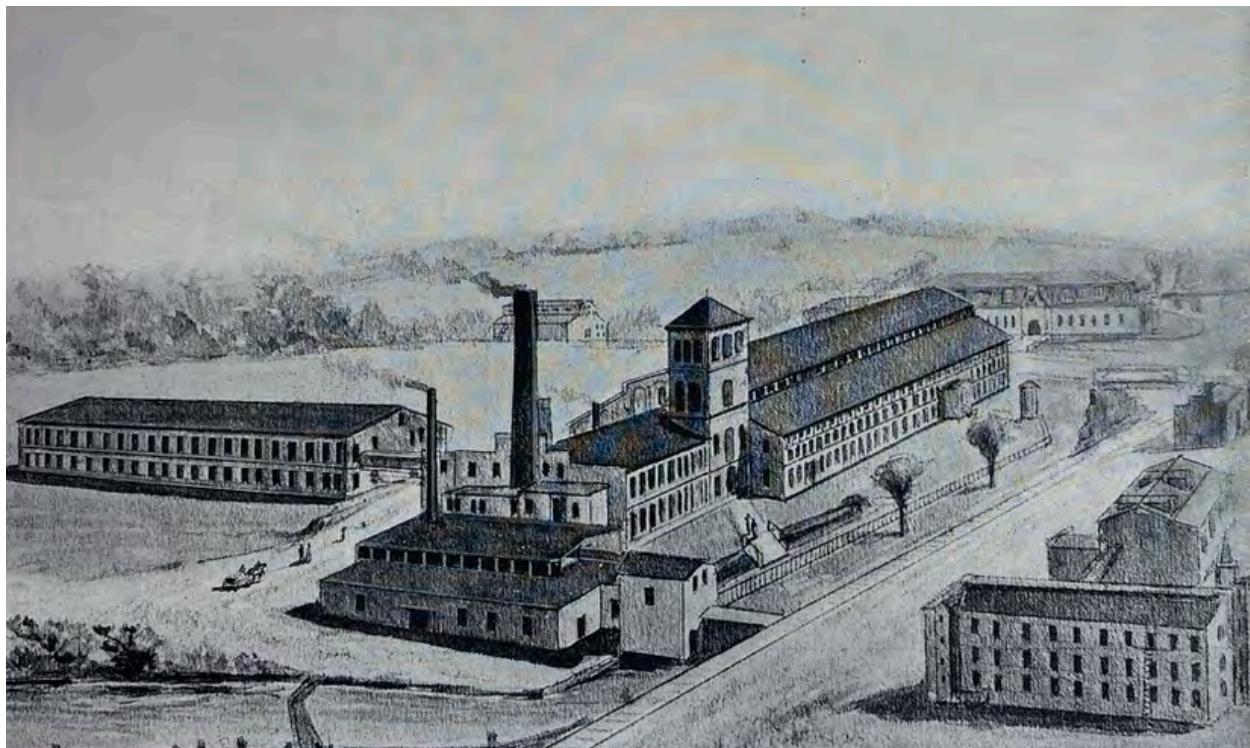
Beers Atlas of 1870 showing the new development in central Webster (Depot Village) along Main Street with the mills of South Village to its right. Note the railroads constructed in 1840 and 1865. North is to the upper right.



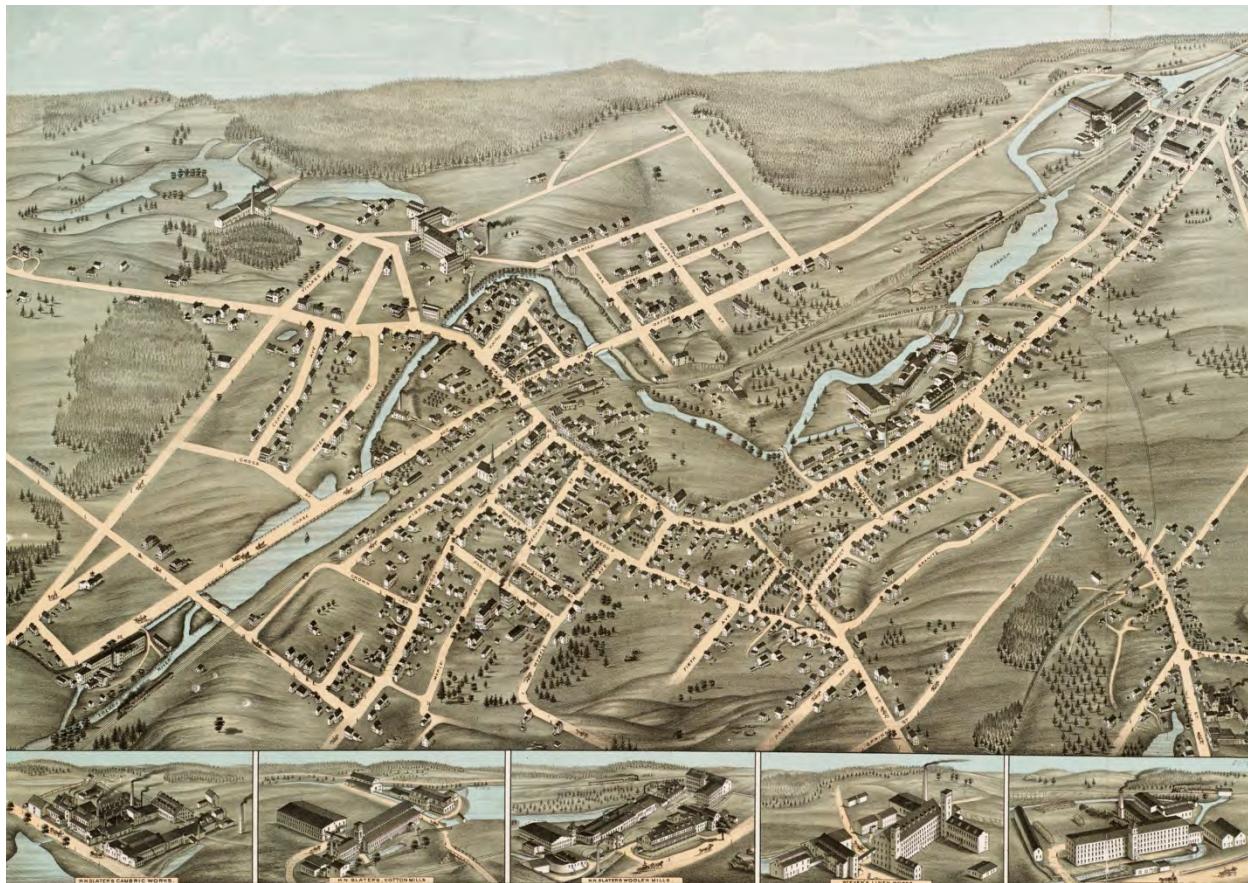
Similar view from Tucker 1984 showing the ownership of building in 1866.



The woolen mills in South Village depicted in 1876. The Spinning & Carding Mill building on the upper left survives and is pictured in a photo in the next section of this chapter. (*The Slater Mills at Webster, S. Slater & Sons: 1912*)



The cotton mills of North Village depicted in 1876. (Slater & Sons: 1912)



Birdseye view of Webster from 1878



North Village, Company Worker Housing – 1850



North Village, Company Worker Housing – 1856

Examples of outstanding mid-19th century stone worker housing in North Village



North Village, Single Family House – 1850



North Village, Double Worker House - 1840



North Village, Multiple Family Worker Housing – 1860



North Village, Multiple Family Worker Housing – 1856

Examples of wood framed worker housing in North Village

LATE INDUSTRIAL PERIOD (1870-1915)

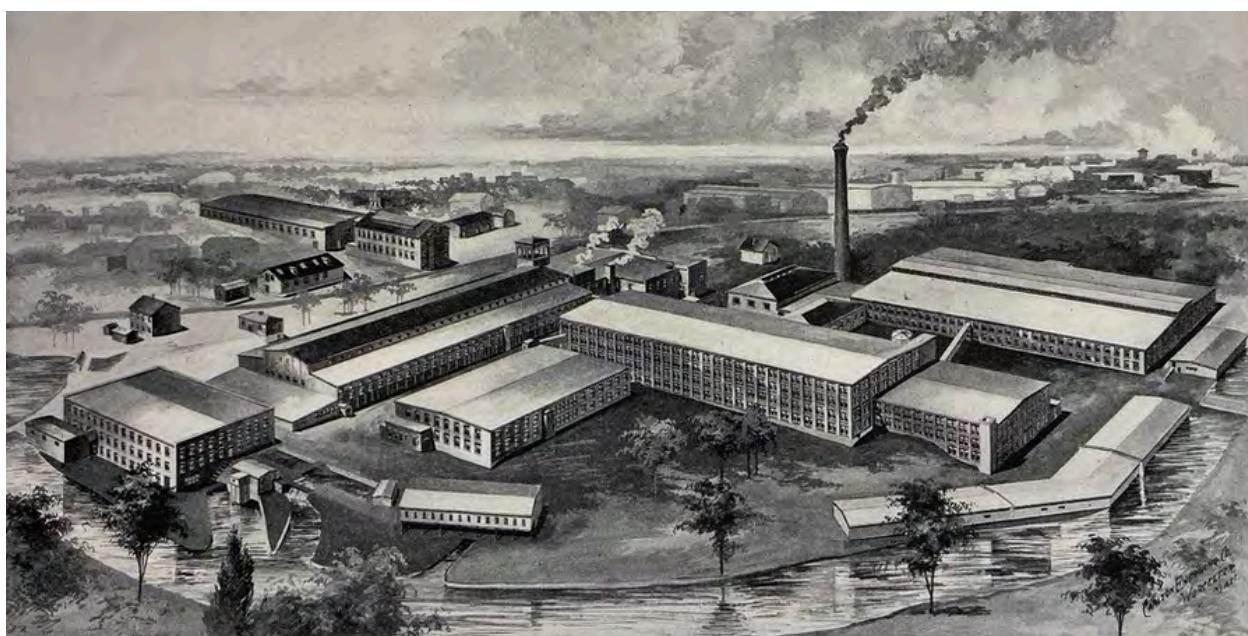
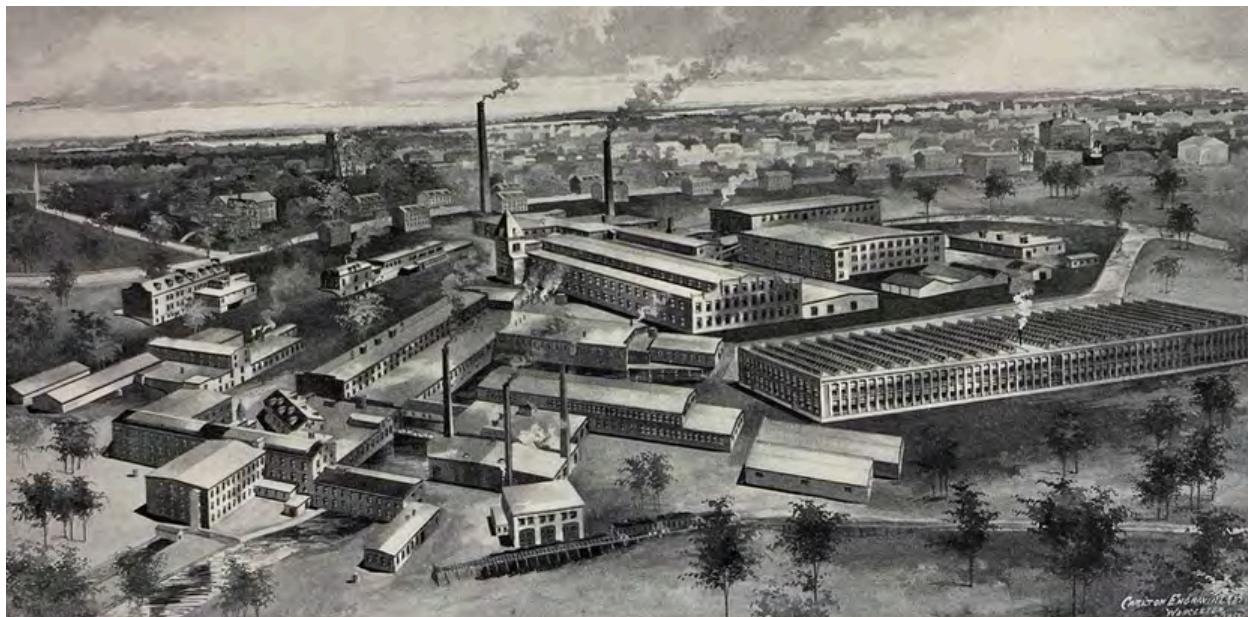
The development trends outlined for the Slater mills and Webster during the Early Industrial Period multiplied and came to full maturation during the late 19th and early 20th century Late Industrial Period. The Slater mills continued to modernize and expand, reaching the zenith of their growth and leadership in textile manufacturing nationally. The death of Horatio Slater and Dudley mill owner Henry Stevens in 1899 and 1901 marked an end of an era in the town's manufacturing history.

Webster continued its steady growth during this period, nearly tripling from 4,763 in 1870 to 12,565 in 1915. Immigrants continued to make up a significant part of the town, reaching its highest percentage, 41.4%, in 1885. Germans and French Canadians dominated along with Austrians. By 1915, Poles became more than 40% of the Webster's foreign-born population.

The depression of the early 1890s impacted the mills, and the Slater mills took the opportunity to modernize. By the late 1890s, the Slater Woolen Company

employed 900 men and women while the East and North Villages employed 800. The mill in East Village was reconstructed after a fire in 1878 with additional buildings added in 1907 and 1911. New mill buildings were constructed in South Village in 1876, 1892, and 1903. Buildings were added to North Village in 1896, 1900-1911, 1911-1915, and 1914-1915.

Other manufacturing enterprises were introduced to the town as well, increasing its manufacturing base. The Perry Yarn Mill and Intervale Puritan Mill just north of it were constructed in North Village about 1900. Additional small manufacturing shops were introduced in other portions of Webster as well. Shoe manufacturing was the second leading industry in the town.



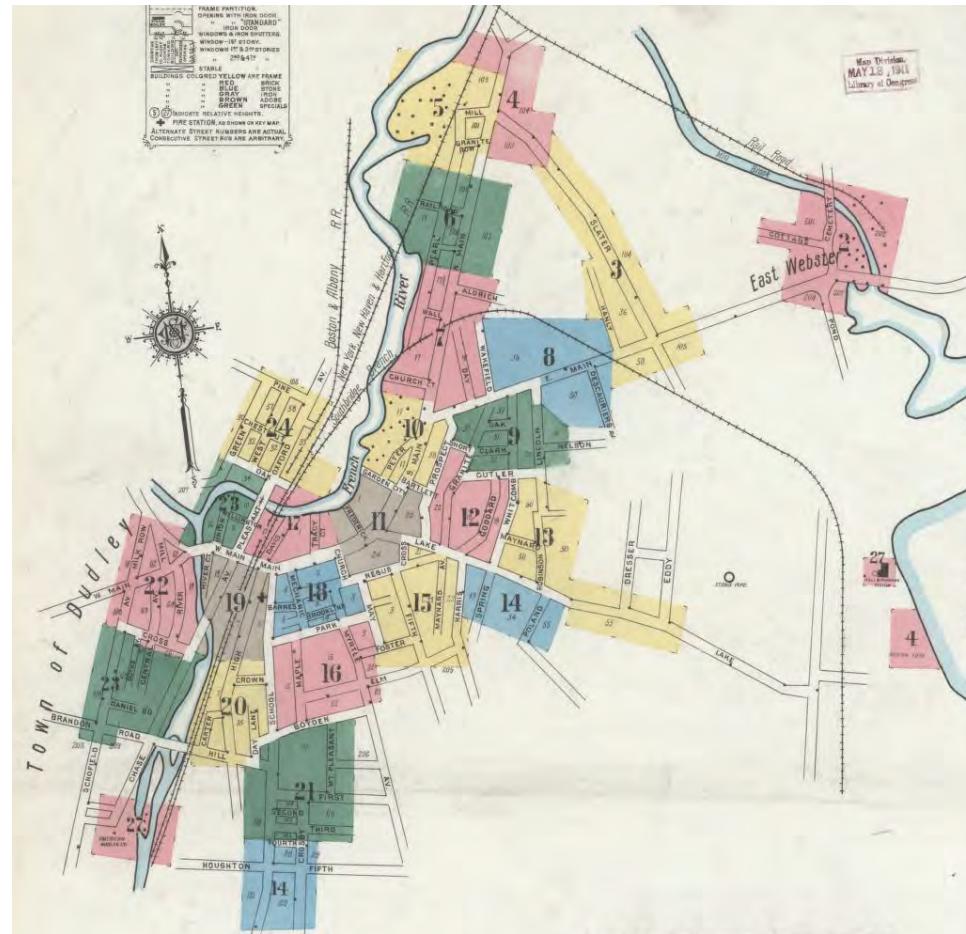
Drawings of the mills in South Village (top) and North Village (bottom) in 1912 showing their dramatic expansion. (Slater & Sons: 1912)

The expansion of housing for workers in the vicinity of the mills included the new types of tenements discussed for the previous period and lined streets, with two-family duplexes along with four-family and six-family tenements. New housing devoted mostly to new immigrants increased the area of each of these historic villages. As the immigrant population grew, the number of churches focusing on particular ethnic groups increased, including Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church on East Main Street (1895) serving French Canadians and St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church (1913-14) on Whitcomb Street serving the Polish population.

During this period Main Street in Depot Village was in the process of changing from a mixed residential, commercial, and institutional neighborhood to a more exclusively commercial/institutional district. New building types featured multi-story brick commercial blocks establishing Depot Village as the emerging downtown commercial center for the town. It was also becoming a civic center with the construction of Bartlett High School in 1905, a Federal Post Office in 1912, and nearby churches. New private residential neighborhoods expanded south and west of Main Street.



Detail of Webster from the 1898 atlas showing the growth of downtown, South Village, and North Village compared to the 1870 atlas depicted on a previous page.



Index map from the 1911 Sanborn atlas for Webster showing areas that have been mapped building by building showing details of the town's development in the early 20th century.



South Village, Spinning & Carding Mill – 1876



North Village, Weave Mill #7 – c. 1913-14

Surviving mill buildings in South and North Villages



Downtown, Racicot Block – 1905



Downtown, Larchar-Branch Block – 1912

Examples of early 20th century commercial buildings downtown



North Village, Pearl Street Worker Housing – 1885



East Village, Double Worker Housing – 1900



North Village, Pearl Street Worker Housing – undated



North Village, Double Worker Housing – 1897

Examples of worker housing in East, South, and North Villages

EARLY MODERN PERIOD (1915-1940)

Webster's Slater family mill complexes and their surrounding residential neighborhoods reached a peak period of development in the early 1920s. Despite increases in production during the two world wars, the Slater company era was ending, with the sale or closure of its three mill complexes in 1923 and 1936. However, a variety of new manufacturing firms were established in Webster during the 1920s, broadening the economic base. Together with the other textile and shoe firms already existing, Webster's twenty manufacturing firms continued to employ 3,141 men and women by 1940.

Webster's population grew modestly from 12,565 in 1915 to 13,389 in 1925, thereafter remaining steady at that level into the 1960s. Immigration slowed, and the percentage of foreign-born within the town decreased to 18.2% by 1940. Poles, French-Canadians, Germans, and Italians continued to be the primary ethnic groups.

During World War I, the Slater mills suspended all work on civilian orders and produced only U.S. government orders for the Army, Navy, and Red Cross. In 1923, the trustees who had taken over management of the company in 1899 following Horatio Slater's death sold the woolen mills in South Village to the American Woolen Company, the first of the mills to be sold. In spite of the change in ownership, the mill continued to manufacture uniform cloth for the United States Army, Navy, and Marines as well as cloth for the interiors of cars. The woolen mills in South Village continued to operate until 1954.

The North Village works shifted to rayon and cotton production in the early 1930s. In 1936, the operations were gradually phased out and moved south. In 1938, Slater and Sons closed the North Village plant and sold the property to Associated Industries, who manufactured shoes on the property and brought other manufacturing firms to the complex. In 1979, a fire destroyed Mill Buildings #4, #5, and #8 with a loss of 700 jobs.

In 1935-36, the Slater company sold the mill works in East Village to the Cranston Print Works Company, which operated until 2009. Owned by William Rockefeller, the company produced finish cottons on the site, employing 700 people in its print and dye works in 1939. Following a hiatus, the Cranston Print Works began expanding and modernizing the East Village mill complex. Some older buildings were removed, and new buildings were added in 1947, the 1950s, 1970s, and 1980s. In 1987, its employees purchased the company.

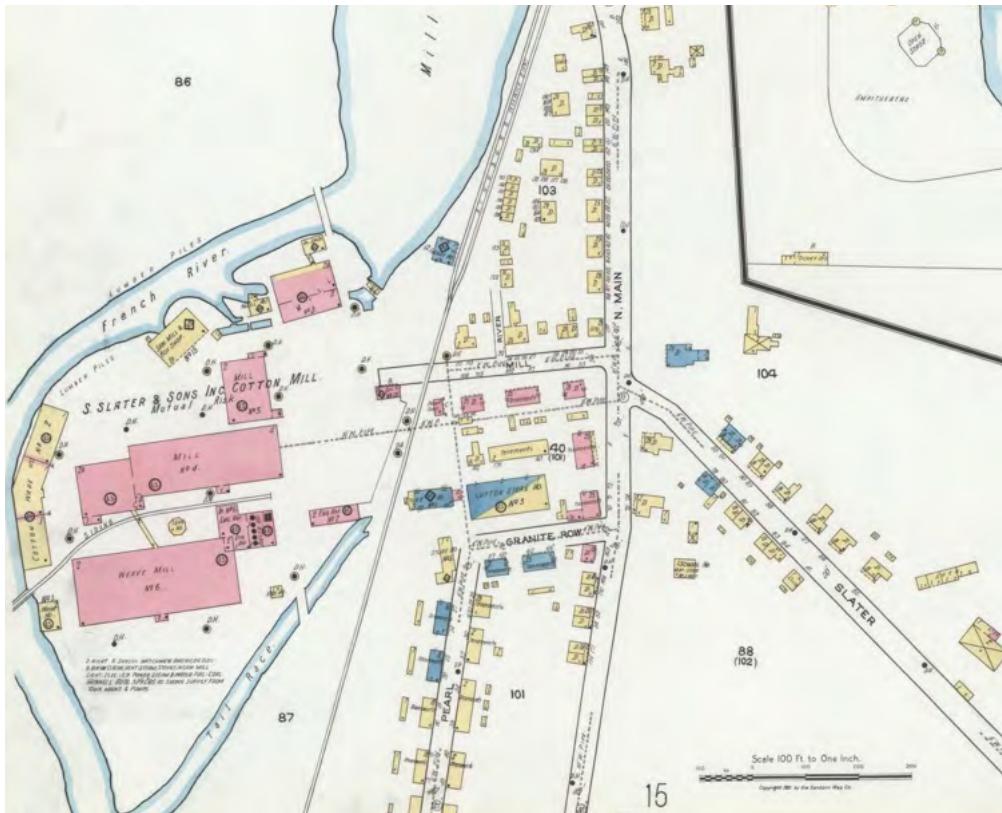
In 1928, needing capital and no longer requiring housing for its employees, Slater and Sons, Inc. sold its residential properties in East Village. Auctioned off were four cottages, 27 two-family houses, and two six-family houses. In 1935, three years before they closed down the mill in North Village, they sold their residential properties primarily in North Village. Auctioned off were 53 dwellings, including 9 cottages, 18 duplexes, 3 two-family houses, 20 four-family houses, and 3 six-family tenements. Also included were 2 commercial properties, a gymnasium, and 245 acres of land. The divestiture ended 110 years of Slater family ownership and management of worker housing there. While the sale opened land for development, most of the North Village was

nearly built-up, and new development tended to occur outside the already developed streetscapes.

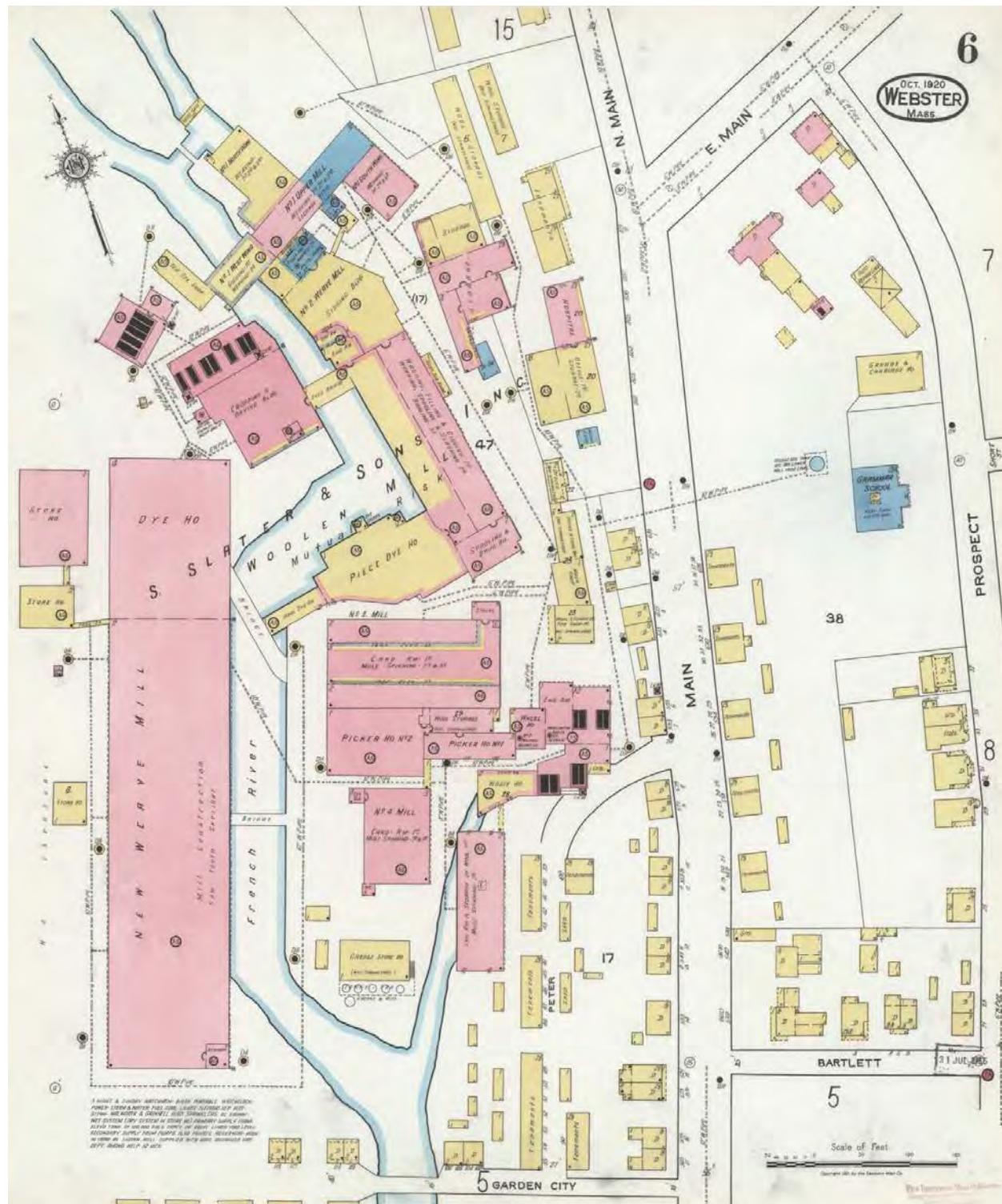
Downtown Webster continued to develop through the 1920s with the construction of several new blocks of large brick commercial buildings, fully establishing the historic downtown center that is the focus of revitalization efforts today. The Town's municipal complex was established at the east end of Downtown with the construction of the Corbin Library in 1921 and Webster Town Hall in 1928, which was physically connected to the 1903 Bartlett School by a new auditorium. The grounds served as a common for community memorials.

The construction of summer cottages on the east and west shores of Webster Lake at Wawela Park and Brick Island began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Spurred by the widespread use of the automobile, cottage development intensified all around the lake during the Early Modern Period, turning Webster and Webster Lake into a thriving summer destination. Plans showing the proposed cottage and hotel development of Colonial Park at the south end of the lake date to 1909, 1911, and 1920.

South and east of downtown, new residential neighborhoods continued to expand with single-family and multi-family construction. Sanborn maps from the 1920s and 1930s show the extent of pre-World War II development, most of which has not been inventoried for its historical significance.



Sanborn map from 1920 showing the cotton mill in North Village. Brick buildings are shown in red, granite buildings are in blue, and wood buildings are in yellow.



Sanborn map from 1920 showing the woolen mills in South Village. Brick buildings are shown in red, granite buildings are in blue, and wood buildings are in yellow. Sanborn maps from the 1920s and 1930s can be used to assess building and development through the end of the Slater mill period and the amount of building loss that the historic mill town has experienced since.



Giles Block – 1925 (left)



Holden Block – 1921

Examples of culminating downtown commercial buildings prior to the Depression



Webster Municipal Building – 1928



Three-Decker Worker Housing – c.1920s



Multiple Family Dwelling House – 1920

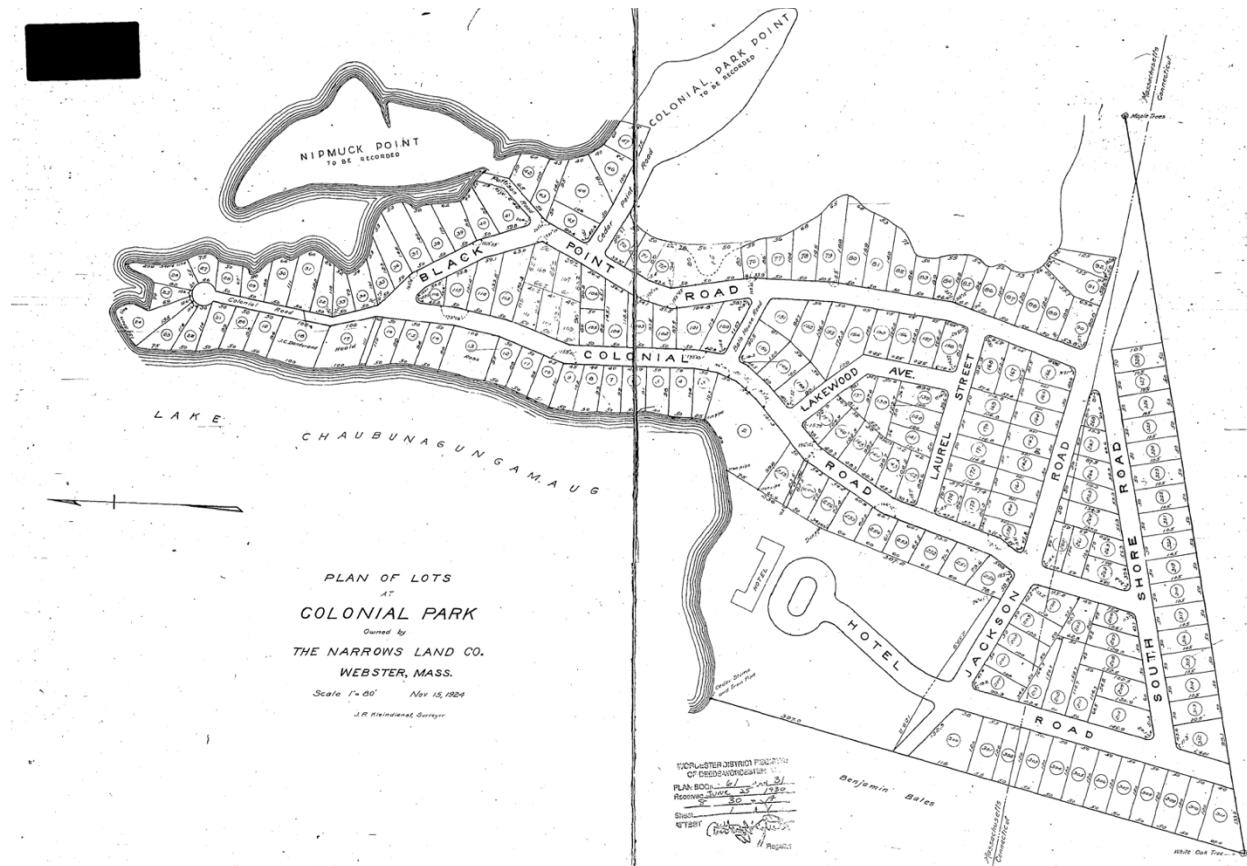


Multiple Family Dwelling House – 1925

Examples of Early Modern Period multi-family worker housing



Examples of early 20th century cottages on Webster Lake



1924 plan for cottage and hotel development of Colonial Park at the south end of Webster Lake. North is to the left.

LATE MODERN PERIOD (1940-PRESENT)

The closure and sale of the Slater mills in North and East Villages in the mid-1930s ended a century and a quarter of historical development showcasing the evolution of American textile manufacturing under the leadership of the Slater family. Other late-19th and early 20th century manufacturing sectors that had broadened Webster's economy but were no longer viable in the mid-20th century, such as shoe manufacturing, were lost as well. Nonetheless, Webster remained economically stable through the late 20th century and into the 21st century.

Historically, Webster grew at an average rate of about 28.7% per year between 1850 and 1920 as the town's textile mills and other manufacturing businesses expanded and matured. Since 1920, with the decline of key late-19th and early 20th century industries, Webster has grown at an average rate of about 3% per year, with population losses recorded in 1930 (-2%) and 1980 (-2.9). The highest increases over those decades were recorded in 1970 (9%) and 1990 (11.9%). The Town of Webster had a population of 17,776 in 2020, an increase of 6% since 2010.

Due to the loss of its mill industries, Webster was considered one of the state's most economically distressed regions. Yet, though the town's physical growth and the *rate* of its population growth decreased through the late 20th century, Webster retained employment opportunities such that it remained stable and did not substantially decline.

Over this period, Webster transitioned into a commuter town to Worcester and the broader south-central Massachusetts region. Key to this transition has been the construction of Interstate 395, which was completed in 1978. Formerly state Route 52, the roadway provided a direct link from I-290 south to the Connecticut state line. Route 52 was upgraded in the late 1960s as a limited access highway from the state line north to Oxford, from which motorists accessed Route 12 to reach points north. In the mid-1970s, the highway was extended north to I-290 in Auburn, becoming I-395.

I-395 provides a direct link between Worcester south to I-95 at the coast in Connecticut. Simplified and reduced travel times made regional access easy and transformed Webster into a regional commuter town serving greater Worcester. A significant number of Webster's workforce commutes to jobs outside of the town.

Within the town, Webster has transformed from a manufacturing-based economy to a service-based economy. Though manufacturing still has a presence, industries with the greatest representation in the business community include miscellaneous service industries such as education, health, retail, and professional and business services. The small business community is important to the local economy. Over half of business establishments in Webster have fewer than five employees.

MAPFRE Insurance is a notable exception. MAPFRE Insurance, a European company, acquired Commerce Insurance in Webster in 2008 and made the town

its US headquarters. MAPFRE employs 1800 persons, many of whom commute to town. The insurance company established offices in Downtown and at the I-395 interchange with East Main Street/Gore Road.

Webster Lake evolved as a continuing and actively developing recreational attraction over the last half of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century. New infill occurred, and small early 20th century cottages were replaced or added on to creating a constantly evolving character. Lakeside property values have steadily increased, and the lake community has become an important economic and social center.

In contrast, the historic mill town changed little. Many historic mill buildings in North and South Villages were lost to fire and/or demolition, while remaining mill buildings deteriorated and served marginal commercial uses. Housing around the two villages remained largely intact, though some losses occurred, especially along South Main Street in South Village.

The Cranston Print Works in East Village remained an important town employer until it closed in 2009. Thereafter, the mill was demolished and replaced with a shopping and service center servicing the community and the key I-395 interchange. Though a loss to historic preservation, this transformation of East Village was important to the community both economically and in terms of local services. Only a few historic mill-related resources remain in the East Village vicinity.

Downtown Webster became frozen in time with the Depression and the end of its 1920s development period. Little change occurred over the following decades. From the mid-19th to mid-20th centuries, Downtown Webster was the social and economic heart of the southern Worcester County region. Its substantial downtown commercial building stock reflects this past importance. In the late 20th century, its importance as a sub-regional center diminished. Its number of retail and service business declined. Its physical condition deteriorated. Vacancy levels increased at the street level and were predominant on upper floors. Several historic commercial buildings were demolished leaving gaps in the streetscape.

Beginning in the early 2000s, the Town focused on Downtown revitalization in its economic development strategies. A number of Downtown studies were undertaken. Streetscape improvements were implemented. Parking was created to the rear of Main Street. MAPFRE Insurance contributed to the revitalization with a major office building investment, including rehabilitation and new construction. French River Park was established. These efforts are continuing into their final phases today. The goal of rehabilitation of Downtown's historic buildings and revitalization with new street activity with restaurants and retail is recognized.

Webster has also invested in its municipal complex adjacent to Downtown. The Former Bartlett High School, now the Anthony J. Sitkowski School, was rehabilitated into senior housing between 2010 and 2016 using federal Historic Preservation Tax Credits. Construction of the new Gladys E. Kelly Public Library was completed in the municipal complex in 2018. The new library replaced the

1921 Corbin Public Library, which was demolished through an agreement with the Massachusetts Historical Commission.

Between Downtown and East Village, South and East Main Streets have been developing as a commercial corridor, with new suburban-style businesses filling in the streetscape, building upon the shopping center in East Village. A number of significant historic residential buildings have been lost to demolition in the process. Suburban-style sprawl continues to threaten what remains of South and East Main Streets' historic character.

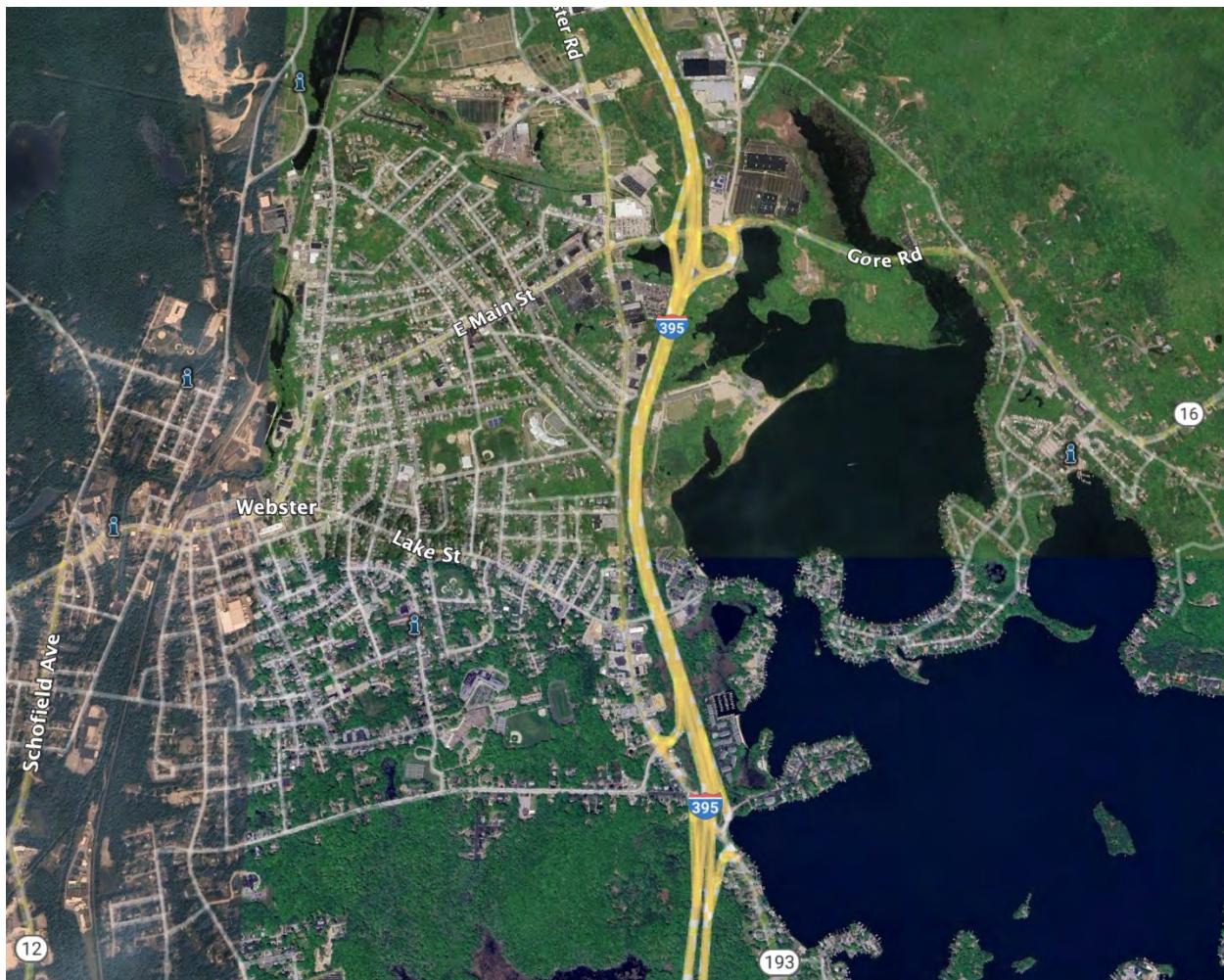
Despite the decline of the historic mill town, new suburban development in the late 20th century expanded the developed area of Webster's core between North and East Villages and adjacent to the late 19th century neighborhoods south of Main Street. Some of this land became free for development following the Slater company's 1935 sale of land they had owned for many decades.

Because of the mill town's late 19th century economic challenges, the U.S. Census Bureau designated the historic urban portion of Webster as a Census Designated Place (CDP) so that demographic characteristics of the urbanized area could be tracked separately from the rest of the town. Residents often say that there are two Websters, the one east of I-395, including the lake community and surrounding open landscape, and the one west of I-395, predominantly including the historic mill town. The CDP designation affirms this perception.

The population of the Webster CDP was 12,194 in 2020, 68% of the entire town. Similar to the town as a whole, its population increased by 6.8% over the decade, so population loss was not an issue. The CDP population was 66% White, 22% Hispanic, 8% African American, and 1.2% Asian, not markedly different from the entire town, which was 74% White, 17% Hispanic, 6% African American, and 1% Asian. Clearly, Webster beyond the CDP is more white. The inflow of the Hispanic population in the late 20th century concentrated in the CDP marked a new demographic change.

Within the CDP, 49% of persons lived in owner-occupied housing. A majority of residents (53.7%) are of low- or moderate-income. Median household income was only 70.7% of the Commonwealth as a whole and 83.3% of Worcester County as a whole. 18% of persons were living in poverty.

Given these figures, the many multi-family residences do not rent for highly profitable rents, and the maintenance of the historic mill residences varies. While the residential areas of the historic North and South Villages remain relatively intact (especially North Village), the appropriate treatment of the historic residences in accordance with preservation principles and standards is a challenge.



Central Webster with the historic mill town (left) and upper portion of Webster Lake (right). (Google Earth)



Except its mill, North Village (left) remains largely intact, while East Village (right) was redeveloped after 2009.



CHAPTER 3

INVENTORY, RECOGNITION, AND TREATMENT

Webster has undertaken a number of steps over the years in the identification and protection of its historic resources. Chapter 3 looks at activities that are basic to historic preservation at the local level, highlighting actions that have been taken in the past and outlining recommended next steps.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the basics of preservation planning involve the identification, evaluation, and protection of historic resources through the development of programs, methods, tools, and processes for their preservation and continued use. These basics should be at the core of the community's historic preservation program and include programs for the inventory, recognition, and treatment of historic resources.

These programs depend upon both public sector and private sector partners and actions. As outlined below and in the appendices to this plan, well developed national and state processes, incentives, and support are available to guide and assist municipalities in development and implementation of preservation programs at the local level. It is up to local stakeholders to take advantage of this support and keep preservation activities moving forward no matter the current level or status of activity.

HISTORICAL COMMISSION

Historic preservation is an interconnected endeavor implemented at the national, state, and local levels. While supported by national and state programs and methodologies, the most important preservation activity happens at the local level led by local entities and with the participation of local residents, officials, and volunteers who know their communities, histories, and historic resource best.

The role of the Historical Commission is to make historic preservation central to Webster's identity and quality of life and to fully integrate historic preservation values and considerations into every aspect of Town programs and processes.

Local government in Webster plays a critical role in the identification of resources and in providing protections through the administration of routine governmental regulatory and planning processes. Key is the role of the Webster Historical Commission, whose goals are to make historic preservation central to Webster's identity and quality of life and to fully integrate historic preservation values and considerations into every aspect of Town programs and processes.

The Webster Historical Commission is the Town entity responsible for communitywide historic preservation planning. Established by Town Meeting in 1974 under Section 8D of Chapter 40 of the General Laws of the Commonwealth, the Historical Commission has the duties and responsibilities enumerated therein. Its seven members are appointed by the Board of Selectmen.

As an advisory body to the Board of Selectmen and other Town boards, commissions, and committees, the Historical Commission must be **proactive** in its mission of preserving and protecting historic resources in Webster. It is responsible for the identification of historic resources significant to the Town's history and character and for the encouragement and promotion of their recognition, preservation, and appropriate treatment.

The Historical Commission addresses its responsibilities by overseeing and coordinating the implementation of Webster's local historic preservation program as outlined in this plan.

The Historical Commission should participate actively in Town governance and be integral to Town activities, policies, and programs. As an advisory body, the Historical Commission should make sure that other Town entities have the information and guidance they need to make informed decisions about actions that may have an impact upon historic buildings, structures, landscapes, and sites.

The Historical Commission should work closely with Board of Selectmen, Economic Development Committee, Planning Board, and Conservation Commission. It should work closely with other Town commissions, committees, and staff that are likely to have an impact on the physical character of the community. It should make recommendations to these bodies on issues related to historic preservation and advocate for the appropriate treatment of historic resources.

Above all, the Historical Commission must maintain a proactive stance in taking responsibility for the leadership of historic preservation initiatives in Webster.

RECOMMENDATION 3A: Organize the Webster Historical Commission to take responsibility for the overall leadership and coordination of the Town's historic preservation program as outlined in this preservation plan. Priority one recommendation to be undertaken by the Webster Historical Commission with support from Planning staff and the Board of Selectmen.

In organizing its activities, it is suggested that the Historical Commission:

- Prepare a yearly **work plan** outlining what it wishes to accomplish over the course of the year in addition to management of day-to-day affairs. Include elements related to each topic of this chapter and each chapter of this preservation plan. Assess the progress in execution of the work plan at monthly meetings and make adjustments as necessary.
- **Organize** Historical Commission **members** to engage and maintain relationships with Town boards, commissions, and committees and their activities.
- Use the annual budget provided by the Town to the Historical Commission to retain a professional **preservation consultant** on an on-call basis to provide advice and assistance when needed.
- Prepare an **annual report** to the Board of Selectmen and Town Meeting reviewing the condition of historic resources in Webster. Provide an overview of projects and issues addressed over the course of the year, specifically, a) a summary of activities over the past year, b) an overview of Demolition Delay reviews, c) review of projects undertaken, and d) priorities to be addressed over the coming year.
- Make an **in-person presentation** to the Board of Selectmen outlining the annual report and focusing on larger Town initiatives relating to historic preservation, such as planning and economic development initiatives.

Responsibilities of Historical Commission Members

In undertaking its role, the Historical Commission must have members who are willing and able to be active participants in Town affairs. Like most towns in Massachusetts, local government in Webster is comprised largely of volunteers drawn from a relatively small group of residents who are committed to community service and betterment and willing to dedicate valuable time to community affairs. Many Town volunteers serve on multiple boards, commissions, and committees, and they often rotate to different roles over the years.

Webster's boards, commissions, and committees are fortunate in having support from a small, dedicated staff that includes the Town Administrator, Director of Planning and Economic Development, Director of Community Development, Building Commissioner, and others. The Town's staff and volunteer corps, however, have limited capacity and time such that the tasks being undertaken by boards, commission, and committees must be organized, prioritized, and targeted to what can reasonably and realistically be achieved. This is true for the Historical Commission as well.

Concerted and continuing effort must be made to enlist volunteers willing to serve on the Historical Commission.

Over the years, Webster's Historical Commission has had difficulty in finding dedicated volunteers and in maintaining its momentum. Because of the small size of the Town's staff, Historical Commission members must play a direct role in managing Historical Commission activities and affairs. The work of the Historical Commission must therefore be tailored to the capabilities of its members and the amount of time they have available.

With those limitations in mind, concerted effort must be undertaken to enlist volunteers willing to serve on the Historical Commission. In doing so, the expectations and responsibilities of members should be clearly delineated. A written summary of responsibilities should be prepared to which each member should be expected to agree and commit themselves. Members should not be expected to overextend themselves—tasks can be assigned to every level of potential active participation, and every level of participation is appreciated. But members should be expected to be actively engaged and willing to commit to work assignments to the extent they are able.

RECOMMENDATION 3B: Identify and cultivate potential future Historical Commission members. *Priority one recommendation to be undertaken by Historical Commission members on an ongoing basis.*

Historical Commission members need not be experts in historic preservation, but they should become informed about Webster history and the Town's historic resources. Subcommittees may be formed to undertake the tasks outlined in this chapter and additional volunteer assistance should be recruited from residents as necessary and possible. Subcommittees must comply with Massachusetts's Open Meeting Law, which prohibits a quorum or more from meeting without public notice. Subcommittees should therefore be comprised of a number of members comprising less than a quorum.

The regular monthly meetings of the Historical Commission should be used to review the status of ongoing projects, address issues of concern, and determine courses of action when needed. Meeting agendas should be prepared that are organized by topic and project. The annual work plan recommended above should be crafted to (1) maintain ongoing relationships and monitoring of Town affairs and (2) undertake special designated projects as possible.

With the assistance of Town staff, the Historical Commission should maintain a spreadsheet with a running list of projects and issues under consideration by Town boards, commissions, and committees affecting historic resources. Include land development and subdivision projects under review by the Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, Conservation Commission, and Zoning Board of Appeals. Note the status of each project, dates by which action is required by the board or commission, and the dates by which information and support from the Historical Commission is needed.

Organize assignments for members for the ongoing work of the Historical Commission. Assign specific members to be liaisons to other Town boards, commissions, and committees. Assign members to follow developments related to particular projects of interest or concern.

Among the Historical Commission's most important responsibilities is administration of the Town's **Demolition Delay** Bylaw, which was adopted by Town Meeting in October 2023. With the assistance of Town staff, the Historical Commission is currently working out the details of its Demolition Delay review processes. Additional expertise and examples should be sought on potential alternatives to demolition that can be applied to projects on a case-by-case basis.

Subcommittees should be created for long-term projects and special issues that require sustained work over a period of time. A minimum of two members is suggested for subcommittees such that the two members can support each other and share responsibilities. Consider establishing subcommittees for each of the various topical headings outlined in this chapter and plan.

Expect members to become educated about historic preservation best practices and to attend periodic training sessions when available. Expect members to participate in the monitoring of historic resource issues and conditions, to be engaged in Town affairs, and to be effective ambassadors and advocates for preservation and the appropriate treatment of Webster's historic resources.

Community Preservation Act

In order to implement many of the recommendations outlined in this Historic Preservation Plan, such as historic resource inventories and National Register nominations, sources of grant funding are needed. The Community Preservation Act is the most important source of grant funding for the Commonwealth's most active and effective Historical Commissions.

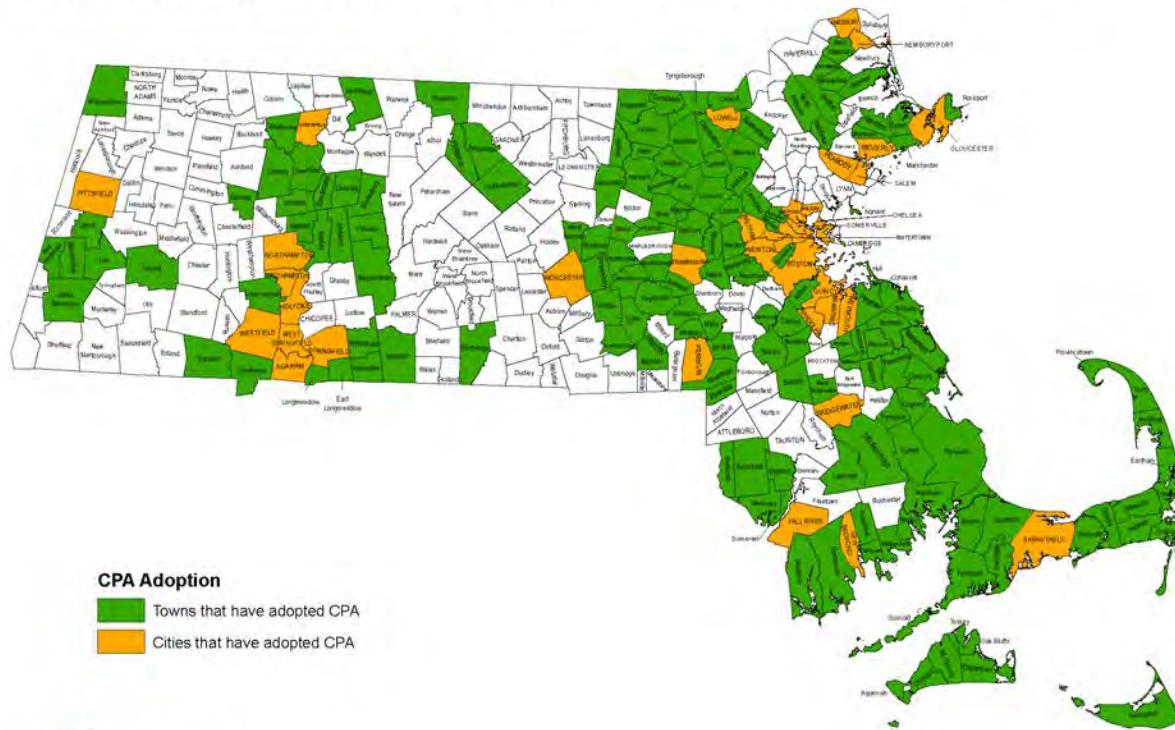
Massachusetts passed the Community Preservation Act (CPA) in 2000 as MGL Chapter 44B, which enables adopting communities to raise local dedicated funds for open space preservation, preservation of historic resources, development of affordable housing, and the acquisition and development of outdoor recreational facilities.

Local funds are matched by distributions from the state's Community Preservation Trust Fund. Webster residents currently pay into the state Trust without receipt of its benefits in return.

Historic preservation projects eligible for funding through the CPA include bricks and mortar projects for public and non-profit-owned buildings and resources as well as preservation planning studies such as historic resource inventories, National Register nominations, historic structure reports, cultural landscape reports, management plans, and other preservation related planning studies. Funds may also be used as grants for preservation projects on private property, which can be an important incentive for properties within a local historic district or for downtown facade improvements.

CPA funds are raised locally through imposition of a voter-authorized surcharge on local property tax bills of up to 3%. Local funds are matched by annual distributions to the community from the state's Community Preservation Trust Fund, a statewide fund held by the Massachusetts Department of Revenue.

As of 2024, 196 communities (55%) in Massachusetts have adopted the CPA and over 16,000 projects have been undertaken. 70% of Massachusetts residents live in a CPA community.



Communities that have adopted the Community Preservation Act – 55% of the state's municipalities with 70% of the state's residents

Each CPA community creates a local Community Preservation Committee (CPC) upon adoption of the Act, and this five-to-nine-member committee makes recommendations on CPA projects to Town Meeting. Applications for CPC grants are generally submitted each October by municipal and non-profit entities seeking project funding and are considered and approved at the spring Town Meeting.

Adoption of the Community Preservation Act is the most important first step in implementation of this Historic Preservation Plan.

Adoption of the Community Preservation Act by Webster is the most important first step in the implementation of this Historic Preservation Plan. With support from Town staff, the Historical Commission should immediately engage with the Board of Selectmen, Conservation Commission, Webster Housing Authority, and other local preservation, conservation, and recreation entities in working toward adoption of the Act.

RECOMMENDATION 3C: Organize and advocate for the adoption of the Community Preservation Act by Town Meeting. Priority one recommendation to be undertaken by the Board of Selectmen, Historical Commission, Conservation Commission, and Webster Housing Authority.

The statewide non-profit Community Preservation Coalition can provide guidance to Webster in the steps necessary for successful adoption. In general, three steps are needed: (1) coordinate with other Town boards, commissions, and committees on the benefits of the CPA and obtain their active support;

(2) prepare a summary report on the details and benefits of adoption that can be made available to residents and property owners, and (3) implement a public outreach program to residents and property owners with information on the benefits of adoption.

Sample summary reports with detailed technical information on the CPA adoption have been prepared by other municipalities in their successful campaigns and are available from the Community Preservation Coalition. To a significant degree, these sample reports can simply be adapted and updated for Webster's use.

Adoption of the Community Preservation Act is an important action for Webster and could be coordinated with a matching action by Dudley in implementation of their economic development planning. Adoption was also recommended in Webster's 2018 Open Space and Recreation Plan and was to have been implemented within the first year. It is essential that Webster adopt the Community Preservation Act as soon as possible in furtherance of the Town's economic and quality of life goals.

HISTORIC RESOURCE INVENTORIES IN WEBSTER

The most fundamental action in the identification of historic resources is the undertaking of surveys or inventories, which should be communitywide. In the early years of historic preservation, inventories were usually undertaken by volunteers from local historical societies with the goal of simply identifying significant resources. Today, most inventories are undertaken by professional consultants using methodologies established over the years at the state and national levels.

The Massachusetts Historical Commission (MHC) manages a system through which communities across the Commonwealth may inventory and document historic properties and related resources. Inventories are prepared by consultants and/or volunteers using a set of standardized forms that are then entered into an online database, the Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System (MACRIS), which may be accessed by the general public. MACRIS is an important tool aiding compliance with state and federal regulations in the assessment of potential impacts of state and federal projects on historic resources. It is also an important tool for use in local community planning and historic preservation.

Two significant inventories have been undertaken in the Town of Webster documenting historic properties. The first inventory was undertaken in 1978/79 and documented resources throughout the Town. The second inventory was undertaken in 2000 concentrating on Webster's mill villages and expanding upon the work completed previously. Together these two inventories were comprehensive, professional, and well done. They focused on primary areas of interest and importance to the Town. They were not, however, complete, and a significant amount of additional inventory work beyond those areas remains to be completed.

Inventory forms for Webster that have been entered into the MACRIS online database include:

- 20 area forms (Form A) prepared for historic areas within Webster including the three mill villages and portions of adjacent neighborhoods;
- 238 individual building forms (Form B) documenting historic buildings within the mill villages as well as in other locations in Webster;
- 6 cemeteries documented through burial ground forms (Form E); and
- 35 monuments and structures documented using Form C for monuments and Form F for structures.

Together, Webster currently has 299 total inventory forms. Below is a summary of the inventory work undertaken during the Town's two primary inventory campaigns.

1979 Inventory

Webster's 1979 historic resource inventory was undertaken for the Webster Historical Commission and completed by Town staff whose salaries were funded through a federal grant. The 1979 inventory is 710 pages in length and divided into eleven sections, ten of which document different areas of Webster. MHC area forms (Form A) were used to provide context information for each of the ten selected areas. Building forms (Form B) were then used to document selected buildings within each area.

The 1979 inventory was a comprehensive and important first step in the identification, documentation, and understanding of historic resources in Webster. Additional background on the 1979 inventory is provided in Appendix E of this preservation plan.

2000 Inventory

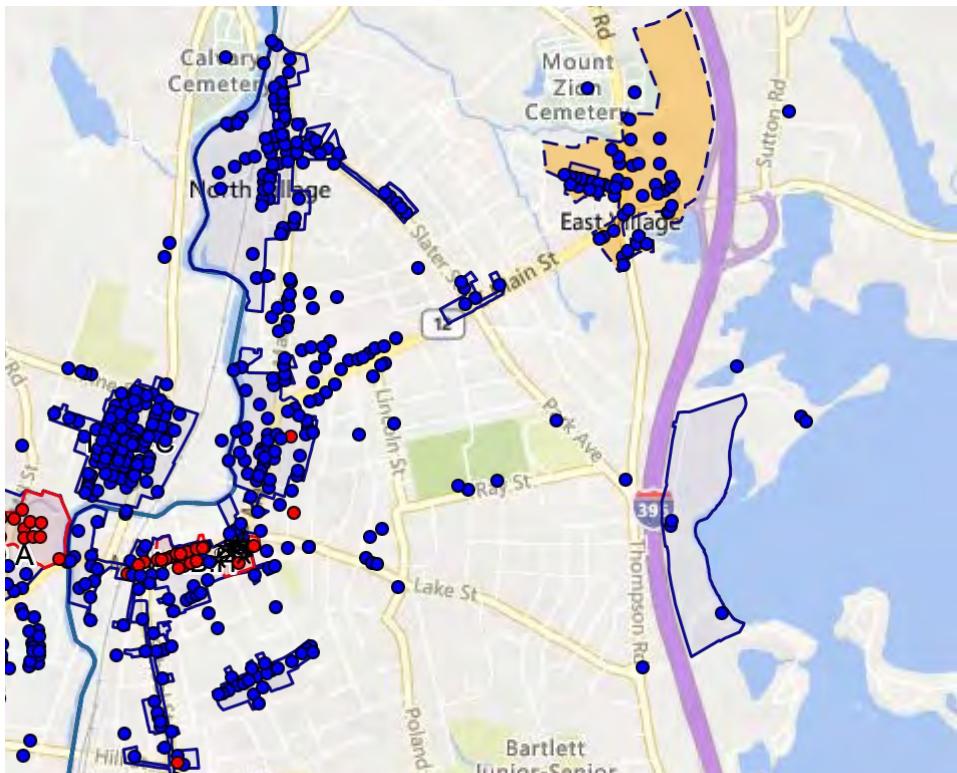
The 2000 inventory for Webster was undertaken by a professional consultant through a grant from MHC and with MHC guidance and technical support. The 2000 inventory updated and expanded upon the survey work undertaken in 1979, focusing on resources that were vulnerable to development pressure and resources potentially eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

Overall, the 2000 inventory surveyed 250 numbered resources, 104 of which had previously been inventoried and approximately 146 which were new. Updated area forms were written for East, South, North, and Center Villages, and new area forms were written for the Municipal Building Area and portions of the Elm Street and School Street neighborhoods, selected because of their well preserved condition.

Combining the work undertaken in the 1979 and 2000 inventories, the following areas of Webster have been recorded in MACRIS:

- Area A: A one-page determination of eligibility for Webster's potential Main Street Historic District (1980);
- Area B: The Tanner District – Old Worcester and Tanner Roads in the northern portion of the Town (1978)
- Area C: The Gore – Lower Gore Road east of Webster Lake (1979)

- Area D: East Village (1979/2000)
- Area E: South Village (1978/2000)
- Area F: North Village (1978/2000)
- Area G: Center Village (1978/2000)
- Area H: Depot Village – Main Street commercial corridor (1978)
- Area I: School Street (1979)
- Area J: Hartley Street, East Village (1978)
- Area K: North Main Street Mill Housing, North Village (1978)
- Area L: Pearl Street Mill Housing, North Village (1978)
- Area M: Starzec Drive Mill Housing, North Village (1978)
- Area N: Slater Street Overseer's Housing, North Village (1978)
- Area O: Mill Street Housing, North Village (1970)
- Area P: Municipal Building Area/Depot Village (2000)
- Area Q: Elm Street Area (2000)
- Area R: School Street Area (2000)
- Area S: The Kingsbury District, Cudworth and Sutton Roads north of Webster Lake (1978)
- Area T: Webster Lake (1979)

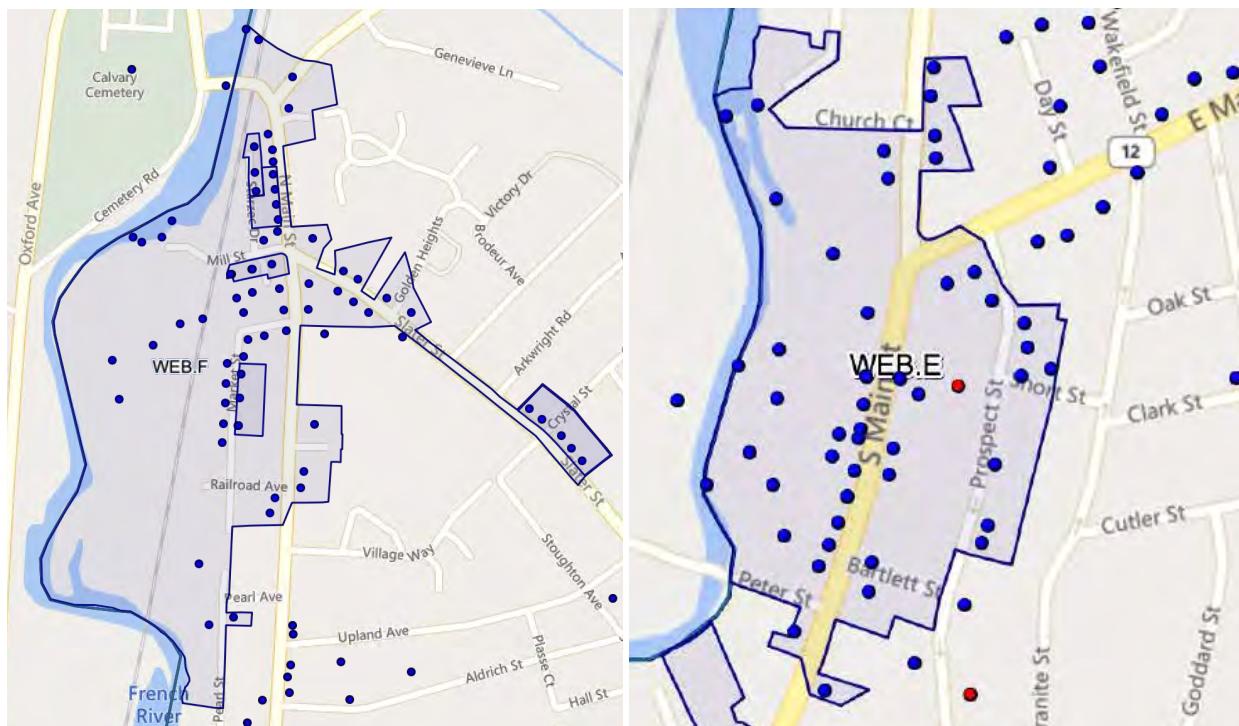


MACRIS map showing inventoried resources in the mill town portion of Webster.
 Individual buildings that have been inventoried are shown as blue dots. Light blue areas are locations where area forms have been prepared. East Village, highlighted in orange, has been largely replaced with new commercial construction.

Together, the 1979 and 2000 inventories for Webster were thorough, professional, and laid a substantial foundation for historic preservation for the Town. The long time periods between the two inventories without continuing inventory work and preservation activity is an issue, however, and does not do justice to the quality of the inventory work completed in those two campaigns. It's been twenty-four years since the 2000 inventory was prepared, and in that time no additional inventory work has been undertaken.

Webster's inventory work is not complete. The existing inventories focused on pre-1900 resources, but in the early twentieth century, the mills, mill villages, and Town continued to grow. Sanborn maps from the 1920s and 1930s show the extent of additional construction within the expanded mill villages, which is part of the historical narrative and has not been inventoried. Other areas of the Town also need further assessment, such as possible agricultural sites along rural roads and cottage neighborhoods at Webster Lake.

Recently, all but a few of the resources associated with East Village have been demolished to make way for new commercial construction associated with the I-395 interchange. Historic residences have been lost along the Main Street corridors as well, especially East Main Street and in South Village. Additions and changes to Webster's historic fabric should continue to be documented on an ongoing basis and steps should be taken to promote their appropriate treatment.



Details of the MACRIS inventory maps for North Village (left) and South Village (right). These inventories focused on pre-1900 residential buildings within the mill villages. A number of early 20th century mill buildings both within the surveyed areas and immediately adjacent were not inventoried or assessed.

Inventory Recommendations

Inventory work should be an ongoing activity undertaken or managed by the Webster Historical Commission. The full range of historic buildings and other resources pre-dating World War II should be inventoried, documenting the Town's full development prior to the closure of North Village and sale of East Village between 1935 and 1938, bringing closure to the Slater family era. The following recommendations are provided.

RECOMMENDATION 3D: Update inventory area forms for North Village, South Village, and East Village taking in account resources that have been demolished and resources that were not previously included. Priority one recommendation to be undertaken by the Webster Historical Commission.

The area forms for North Village (WEB.F), South Village (WEB.E), and East Village (WEB.D) should be reassessed and revised due to evolving conditions including the demolition of buildings, especially in East and South Villages, and the exclusion of buildings both within and adjacent to the existing boundaries of the areas that are clearly related to mill history and development.

Reportedly, the 1979 and 2000 inventories focused on pre-1900 resources, which was important at the time, and did not necessarily include early 20th century resources. Mill worker housing from 1900 through the 1920s does not always appear to have been considered significant to the areas. While it is understandable that village significance may be tied to the period prior to Horatio Slater's passing in 1899, the mills continued to develop into the 1920s. Area forms identify and discuss mill structures from the early 20th century, but it is not clear that the full scope of mill housing from this time period was included.

This action would best be satisfied through preparation of National Register Historic District nominations, at least for North and South Villages, as discussed later in this chapter. If that is not possible, then reexamination of the area forms is recommended.

RECOMMENDATION 3E: Prepare inventory area forms for historic neighborhoods outside of North Village, South Village, and East Village, expanding the areas that had been inventoried previously. Priority two recommendation to be undertaken by the Webster Historical Commission.

As mentioned above, the primary focus of the 1979 and 2000 inventories was the mill villages and not later neighborhoods that were also within the mill era's period of significance but were not initial priorities. Downtown Webster, the Main Street corridor, and selected neighborhood areas along School Street and elsewhere south of Main Street were looked at, but the full area of historic pre-World War II development was not comprehensively covered due to project budgetary restraints.

As noted above, inventory work should be an ongoing activity led by the Historical Commission. In addition to updating existing inventories, new inventories should be prepared for neighborhood areas that have not been covered before. The Historical Commission should consult with the Massachusetts Historical Commission (MHC) on its approach to inventories,

Inventory work should be an ongoing activity led by the Historical Commission to better understand and protect historic resources. The full range of historic buildings and resources should be inventoried.

using MHC's layered mix of area, building, and other area forms to develop a full history of the area. Current standards for area forms in particular can be informative both on the overall historic context for the area being reviewed as well on the details of individual buildings.

Future inventory work can be undertaken in phases over time as funding becomes available. MHC grants generally range in the \$15,000 range which, when matched, yields projects covering about \$30,000 in inventory work. Existing historic neighborhoods in Webster should be broken into areas that make sense historically and geographically and in sizes that can be completed as a single project with available funding. Suggested survey areas for consideration might include:

- A. East of North Village – the eastward expansion of North Village between North Main Street and Slater Street south to East Main Street
- B. East of Prospect and South Main Streets – neighborhood expansion to the east of South Main Street between East Main Street on the north and Lake Street on the south. Prospect Street has already been inventoried in part but may need to be reassessed to include later buildings. This area extends east almost to Park Street and could itself be divided into three survey areas: (a) east of South Main to Lincoln and Robinson Streets, (b) north of Ray Street, and (c) the Lake Street corridor, South Main to Thompson Road.
- C. Southern expansion from Downtown – neighborhood expansion south of Negus Street to Elm Street between School Street on the west and Harris Street on the east.
- D. Southern expansion from Lake Street – neighborhood expansion south of Lake Street to Lyndale Avenue from Harris Street to New Street.
- E. South of Elm Street – neighborhood expansion south of Elm between School Street and Harris Street, especially the Myrtle Street corridor.
- F. East of School Street – expansion south of Main Street along High Street and related areas to Hill Street and further as appropriate.

Note that road corridors noted above as edges should be inventoried as units (both sides of the road) not using the road itself as a boundary. Regardless as to how the survey areas are divided, high quality inventory work should be undertaken until the full area of the historic pre-World War II neighborhood development of Webster town is complete.

RECOMMENDATION 3F: Prepare a history of the development of Webster Lake as a recreational destination and cottage community. Priority three recommendation to be undertaken by the Webster Historical Commission and Webster-Dudley Historical Society.

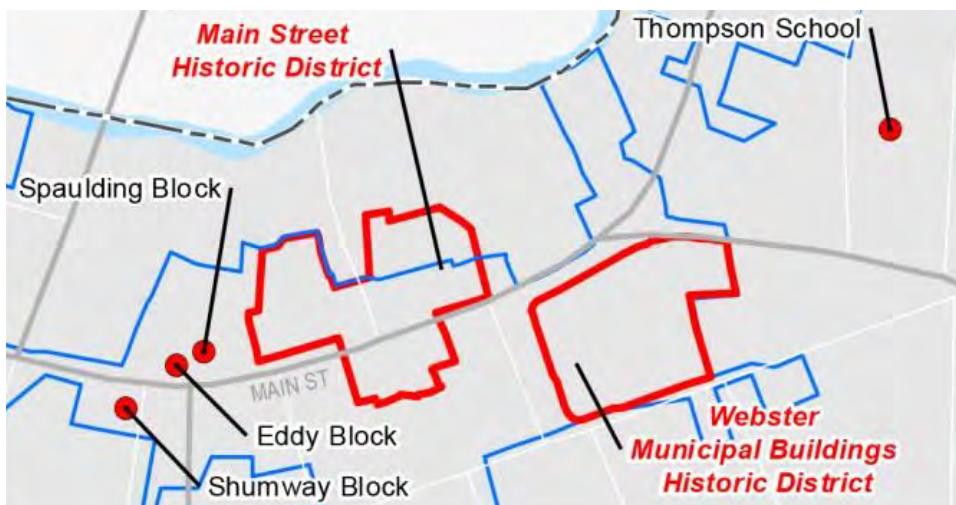
Webster Lake is historically significant to the Town and the region, however continuous and ongoing change has impacted its integrity as a historic area or district. This change will continue into the future, as property owners add to existing residences and build new residences.

It is recommended that an overall history of Webster Lake be prepared from its pre-European use by Native Americans to its development as a recreational destination in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In undertaking this history, areas and resources that retain historic integrity can be identified and documented. The history is important not only for documentation but can be used to encourage preservation of remaining cottages and to influence potential future change around the lake. The history will help build community identity and awareness and to highlight Webster Lake as a destination and economic driver.

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

The National Register of Historic Places is the nation's official list of historic resources and districts that have been determined to be of significance. Administered by the National Park Service in partnership with State Historic Preservation Officers and Tribal Historic Preservation Officers, resources may be significant at the local, state, or national level. A discussion of the National Register is included in Chapter 1 and Appendix B of Webster's Historic Preservation Plan with respect to National and State Historic Preservation Programs. Discussion of Webster's existing National Register listings is presented in Appendix F of this plan.

Listing on the National Register is largely an honorary recognition. It recognizes the importance of a historic resource or area without placing any obligations or restrictions on the resource owner. Listing does not give the federal government any ownership rights or regulatory controls with respect to a property. Listing provides opportunities for grants and other incentives, especially for municipalities.



Map of Downtown Webster from the Town's 2014 Master Plan showing historic districts and individual buildings listed on the National Register in red.

Webster has two National Register Historic Districts along Main Street, listed in 1982 and 2012, and six individual property listings dating from 1980, 1989, and 1991. Three of the individual listings (1980) are for commercial buildings on Main Street, in effect extending the listed Main Street Historic District. The

three other individual listings (1989, 1991) are for former schools, enabling their rehabilitation and adaptive reuse using state and federal tax credits.

The Anthony J. Sitkowski School pictured on the first page of this chapter was rehabilitated between 2010 and 2016 using federal Historic Preservation Tax Credits, for which it was eligible because it was listed on the National Register. The Perry Yarn Mill in Webster's North Village has recently been nominated to the National Register so it may use of federal tax credits in its rehabilitation.

Listing on the National Register is therefore an important economic development tool, providing financial incentives for preservation and rehabilitation. In addition to federal Historic Preservation Tax Credits, Massachusetts implements a state Rehabilitation Tax Credit Program that is also available to owners of listed properties and that is somewhat easier to use. Listing of Webster's Downtown commercial buildings makes them eligible for use of both federal and state tax credits.

North Village and South Village

Perhaps most importantly, listing on the National Register raises public awareness of the significance of a building or area thereby encouraging their appropriate care and treatment. Most important in Webster is the designation of North Village and South Village as National Register Historic Districts to both raise public awareness and lay the groundwork for additional future preservation and rehabilitation initiatives.

North Village, South Village, and East Village were the original village areas that included and developed around the Slater mills over the 19th century. While many of the historic mill buildings are gone, a few mill buildings remain along with the sites of former mill buildings and numerous site features.

Raising public awareness about the historical significance of North and South Villages is an important first step in their preservation and revitalization

Importantly, the residential village areas around the former mills remain largely intact with a high degree of integrity. This is especially true for North Village, where little residential building loss has occurred since the mill closed in 1938. In South Village, building loss has occurred along South Main Street before and since the 2000 inventory was conducted, however the village still appears to retain enough integrity for listing. East Village has been redeveloped since 2009 with loss of its historic mill buildings. Only a few residential buildings remain, not enough for National Register designation as a historic district.

The recommendation for listing of North and South Villages as a priority action is specifically intended to raise their public profile to help prevent additional building loss and to encourage the appropriate treatment of buildings by property owners.

RECOMMENDATION 3G: Prepare nominations of North Village and South Village to the National Register of Historic Places. *Priority one recommendation to be undertaken by the Webster Historical Commission.*

In preparation for this action, the Historical Commission should consult with MHC on process with respect to obtaining an initial opinion on eligibility. Assuming that conditions have not materially changed since area forms were prepared for the two villages in 2000, it is hoped that new National Register

nominations can update, supplement, and fill in previous inventory work.

Potential boundaries for these districts should be reassessed, perhaps including additional adjacent areas. If possible, designation of the villages as Local Historic Districts would be desirable as discussed later in this chapter. Building public awareness through listing on the National Register is an important first step and will encourage preservation, appropriate investment, and revitalization.

Additional Potential National Register Districts and Sites

The 2000 inventory for Webster recommended seven areas for listing as historic districts, including North, South, and East Villages, which are prioritized and are discussed above. Another area, Webster's Municipal Buildings Historic District, was listed in 2012. The three additional areas recommended for listing as National Register Historic Districts include Center Village Area G, Elm Street Area Q and School Street Area R.

Center Village Area (WEB.G) is clustered around the intersection of Slater Street and East Main Street and was composed of three late Greek Revival houses erected in the 1840s and 1850s. Unfortunately, two of the three houses have been lost to new commercial development along East Main Street since 2000 such as the potential historic district grouping no longer exists.



Sole surviving historic house from the Center Village Area that was proposed to be designated as a National Register Historic District in 2000.

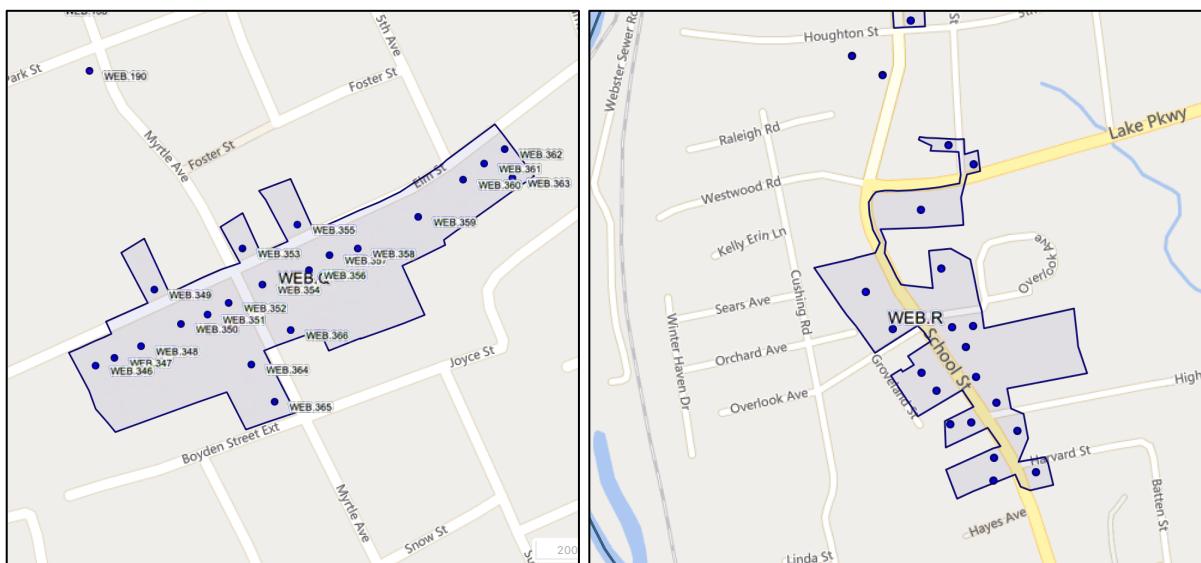
The Historical Commission should consider National Register nomination of areas and properties recommended in the 2000 inventory as well as additional areas and properties as they are inventoried or reassessed. This action begins with updating of the 2000 inventories for areas of interest and obtaining of opinions on eligibility from MHC. Any new MHC-funded work will require

National Register evaluation by the Historical Commission's consultant and an opinion by MHC. The action can be implemented over time as interest and resources are available. Engage property owners in the consideration, outlining the benefits of listing. Use nominations to the National Register as a recognition and incentive for encouraging appropriate building treatment.

RECOMMENDATION 3H: Over time, consider nominations of additional areas and buildings to the National Register of Historic Places. Priority three recommendation to be undertaken by the Webster Historical Commission.

The Elm Street Area (WEB.Q) recommended for National Register designation includes 18 properties that developed in a residential neighborhood in the last decades of the 19th and the first two decades of the 20th centuries. It focuses on residential buildings along Elm Street that retain architectural integrity and center on the Elm Street/Myrtle Street intersection. The area contains single-family dwellings, two-family dwellings, and a number of three-deckers.

Other dwellings located between and around those considered contributing to the district were not included as contributing despite being within the period of significance. Perhaps they were considered not to have retained sufficient integrity. This should be re-examined, as changes that are not extensive or that are reversible could be considered contributing. Most buildings within this area are in good condition and are well treated.



MACRIS mapping of the Elm Street Area (WEB.Q), left, and School Street Area (WEB.R), right, recommended as eligible for listing as National Register Historic Districts.

The School Street Area (WEB.R) includes dwellings lining both sides of School Street between Klebart Avenue on the north to just south of Harvard Street on the south. It also includes two dwellings on Crosby Street off Klebart Avenue that were built at about the same time.

This area includes the most architecturally intact housing stock built for Webster's upper and upper middle class during the first third of the 20th century. These dwellings are in a variety of styles and are cohesive in generally common setback, generous size of building and lot, and fineness of detail. Four

of the area's 16 buildings were built in the second half of the 19th century, three of which are farmhouses built before town development spreading south from Main Street reached the area. Potential boundaries for both the Elm Street and School Street areas will need to be reevaluated.

In addition to seven areas, the 2000 inventory recommended that 14 individual buildings be listed on the National Register. They include:

- Sisters of Saint Anne Convent, 12A Day Street (WEB.269, 1884)
- Saint Anne's School, 12 Day Street (WEB.270, 1913)
- Sacred Heart Church, 12-16 East Main Street (WEB 175, 1895)
- First Baptist Church, 29 East Main Street (WEB.178, 1854)
- First Baptist Church Parsonage, 33 East Main Street (WEB.179, 1854)
- Filmer Grammar School, 41 East Main Street (WEB.181, 1898)
- A. Bixby House, 42 East Main Street (WEB.265, c.1840-50)
- Seigel Hall/Sons of Israel Synagogue, 132 High Street (WEB.115, 1875)
- Esten-Collins House, 189 Old Oxford Road (WEB.188, c.1820)
- Perryville Woolen Mill Storage Shed, Perryville Road (WEB.149, 1874)
- Webster Pumping Station and Clearwell Building, Memorial Beach Road (WEB.265 and WEB.937, 1883)
- World War II Memorial Bath House, Memorial Beach Road (WEB.281, 1952)
- Residence, 20 Stoughton Avenue (WEB.282, c.1925)
- William Meyers House, 24 Whitcomb Road (WEB.195, 1879-91)



The Saint Ann's School on Day Street, formerly associated with Sacred Heart Church, has been sold to private sector investors. If listed on the National Register, the building would be eligible for rehabilitation into housing using federal and state rehabilitation tax credits.

TREATMENT OF HISTORIC PROPERTIES

Among the most remarkable factors for existing conditions in Webster is the high degree of historic integrity of the Town's historic mill neighborhoods. As discussed in Chapter 1, integrity is the degree to which a historic building retains its authentic building fabric and features. Historic neighborhoods are essentially urban cultural landscapes and retain integrity by retaining historic buildings and streetscapes.

Webster's historic mill neighborhoods retain such integrity because they have changed little since the mills closed—the neighborhoods have continued in steady residential use without substantial building vacancy, demolition, or redevelopment. This is particularly true for Webster's North Village, which is substantially intact and was noted for its high degree of historic integrity in the Town's 2000 historic resource inventory, and little has changed in that assessment over the past two decades.

South Village's historic residential areas have experienced more building loss, particularly along South Main Street, underscoring the importance of preventing further demolition of historic buildings in that area. Overall, however, South Village still retains integrity and should be recognized as a critical historic asset and the focus of preservation actions in Webster. East Village, though substantially redeveloped, retains some historic mill residential areas, such as Hartley Street, as well as individual historic buildings along major roads. These too should be a preservation focus.

The continued stability and viability of Webster's historic mill neighborhoods has occurred organically, essentially through benign neglect, without public recognition or action related to their historical significance. This has been fortunate but should change. Specific actions should be taken by the Town through planning, incentives, and targeted regulation to recognize, preserve, and revitalize the historic neighborhoods as assets contributing to Webster's future economic vitality and quality of life. As outlined below, specific actions should be taken to (1) raise public awareness of the historical significance of the mill neighborhoods, (2) preserve the neighborhoods using available historic preservation tools, and (3) promote and support private sector revitalization through creative planning techniques.

While Webster's historic mill neighborhoods have retained their overall integrity, many buildings and other resources within the neighborhoods have not been treated respectfully with regard to their historic character. Altering this trend is a primary focus of this preservation plan.

While continuing in residential use, many buildings within Webster's historic neighborhoods have been treated inappropriately with the removal of character defining historic materials and features. This diminishes the character and historic integrity of the individual historic building. If too many buildings are inappropriately treated and if the inappropriate treatments are severe, the character and integrity of the entire historic neighborhood is negatively impacted.

Webster's historic mill neighborhoods retain historic character and integrity and should be recognized as critical community assets.

Many buildings within Webster's historic neighborhoods have been treated inappropriately, diminishing their character and integrity.

Historic preservation actions in Webster should focus on the preservation and revitalization of historic mill neighborhoods by raising public awareness and engaging with property owners in the appropriate treatment of their historic buildings.

According to current planning documents, about 49% of Webster's historic mill neighborhoods are owner-occupied. This is a good number; people who live in homes that they own tend to take pride in their homes and take good care of them. Preservation/revitalization actions should encourage private sector home ownership in Webster's historic residential neighborhoods. Preservation actions should focus on providing homeowners with information on the historical significance of their homes and on their appropriate treatment—raising awareness of historic character as a quality-of-life issue within the neighborhood.

A significant number of residents in the historic neighborhoods are reported to be blue collar workers holding lower skilled and lower paying jobs in the service sector. Within the Webster Census Designated Place (CDP), 18% of persons were reported to be living in poverty. With respect to potential homeowners, this implies that property owners may not have the financial means to spend money on home revitalization and may seek low cost home improvement solutions that are not preservation friendly.

Fortunately, the types of historic residential buildings in Webster's historic mill neighborhoods do not require expensive preservation treatments. They are simple buildings of wood, brick, or stone that can be maintained and enhanced through straightforward and cost-effective techniques. Such preservation appropriate techniques need to be effectively communicated to homeowners. This is a primary task facing the Webster Historical Commission.

Preservation appropriate techniques need to be effectively communicated to homeowners. This is a primary task facing the Historical Commission.

Many of Webster's historic mill residences are rental properties, including side-by-side duplex dwellings as well as two- and three-story multi-family dwellings. The availability of a significant amount of affordable rental housing in Webster is an asset in being able to attract people to live in Webster from throughout the broader south-central Massachusetts region. The rental market is comprised of singles, couples, young families, and seniors—renters seeking high quality, affordable, multi-family apartments or condominiums in appealing historic neighborhoods of distinctive character.

To attract and serve this market, Webster should continue undertaking actions that make these mill neighborhoods attractive places to live and should continue to enhance quality-of-life amenities within the Town. Efforts should focus on the care and quality of historic rental housing, taking advantage of and encouraging enhancement of their historic character.

Town efforts should focus on the care and quality of historic rental housing, taking advantage of and encouraging enhancement of their historic character.

A profile of rental property owners in Webster's historic neighborhoods has not been available for the preparation of this Historic Preservation Plan. It may be assumed, however, that rental property owners would not object to steps that would enhance the character of the neighborhoods, raise the financial prospects of their clientele, and raise property values. The recommendations provided in this plan should be aimed at engaging with landlords and encouraging their

cooperation in revitalization of Webster's historic neighborhoods. A concern expressed by local leaders has been the high turnover in the Town's rental market—renters come and go and are not invested in the community. It is especially a problem with respect to the local school district. This is an issue to take into account when addressing neighborhood revitalization.



Webster's historic neighborhoods are comprised of many types of small, mostly multi-family residences of appealing character. They are oriented toward a particular market of singles, couples, and young families.



The historic character of many residences has been unnecessarily compromised through inappropriate treatment, diminishing the appeal of the neighborhoods as a whole. These conditions can be reversed over time.

Public Outreach

The most immediate, important, and cost-effective action that Webster can take to promote neighborhood revitalization is to reach out to property owners to encourage and support them in the appropriate treatment of their historic buildings. This includes both owner-occupied properties and rental properties. This action can be implemented by the Webster Historical Commission on an ongoing basis in accordance with its capabilities and resources. Its goal is to raise the interest and awareness of property owners in the history and character of their properties and to provide them with information and support in their appropriate treatment.

Several recommendations provided elsewhere in this preservation plan support this proposed action. These include:

- Nomination of North and South Villages to the **National Register of Historic Places**, which will raise their public profile, provide historical information, and can be promoted;
- Adoption of the **Community Preservation Act**, which will provide the Town with financial resources to undertake both planning and bricks-and-mortar projects supporting neighborhood revitalization;
- Preparation of **design guidelines** for Webster's historic neighborhoods as discussed below; and
- **Branding and interpretive programming** that will engage residents and build community identity.

Beyond these actions, the Historical Commission should undertake a concerted and ongoing program of public outreach to engage property owners in the appreciation and appropriate treatment of their historic properties.

RECOMMENDATION 3I: Implement an ongoing program of public outreach to engage and support property owners in the appreciation and appropriate treatment of their historic properties. Priority one recommendation to be undertaken by the Webster Historical Commission.

This recommendation can begin to be implemented immediately with low cost actions that can be increased over time as resources and capabilities become available. Funding from adoption of the Community Preservation Act is important to its growth and effectiveness. Specific actions to be implemented in addressing this recommendation should be considered by the Historical Commission and will evolve over time and might include:

- Provide residents and property owners with **information on the history and historical significance** of Webster's historic neighborhoods. This includes histories of the Town, mills, neighborhoods, and peoples; inventories and studies of historic resources and resource types; and historic contexts linking Webster history to regional and national trends. Such information could be linked to the Historical Commission website but should also be connected to the Webster-Dudley Historical Society website. Historical information could be presented in published brochures and formats as discussed further in Chapter 5, *Public Engagement*.

A program of public outreach is an immediate and important action in promoting neighborhood revitalization and the appropriate treatment of historic buildings by residential property owners.

- Provide property owners with a one-stop location for **information on the appropriate treatment** of historic properties. This could be an online page linked to the Historical Commission's website outlining principles for maintaining and changing historic buildings and with technical information on dealing with specific issues common to the types of historic buildings in Webster. Links can be provided to other websites such as the National Park Service.
- Undertake an ongoing **publicity campaign** about the treatment of historic buildings. Use the Town website and other Town communication vehicles. Use local newspapers and entities with newsletters and other means of communications. Aim to have an article out at least every three months.
- Prepare and maintain an online **list of qualified local contractors** with expertise in different areas of historic preservation and rehabilitation. As a Town entity, the Historical Commission may not be able to maintain such a list directly, but a non-profit partner such as the Webster-Dudley Business Alliance could, similar to the consultant directory maintained by Preservation Massachusetts. The list would not endorse or specifically recommend any contractor, but to get onto the list contractors would have to demonstrate their expertise and their understanding of historic preservation treatments.
- Provide **technical assistance** to property owners provided by architects and contractors experienced in historic preservation. Such assistance can be provided on a simply volunteer basis, as promotion, or on a contract basis through a program funded through the CPA.
- Implement an annual **awards program** recognizing property owners who are exemplary in the restoration and rehabilitation of their historic buildings. Conduct an awards event during which the Board of Selectmen conveys the award. Publicize in various media formats.
- Consider conducting **workshops** on topics related to maintenance and treatment of historic properties. Feature contractors and specialists on the various topics to discuss and provide demonstrations.
- Reach out to **local realtors** to provide them with information on Webster's historic neighborhoods and resources. Work with realtors in developing promotional materials and approaches highlighting Webster as a desirable place to live because of its historic character.
- Other **potential programs and ideas.**

Design Guidelines

Design Guidelines are documents intended as a resource to guide change in historic communities. They are often prepared for use in designated local historic districts where design review is required, but they can also serve as a community-wide resource for the owners of historic properties generally, helping to inform decision making about appropriate changes to historic buildings from all eras.

Design Guidelines outline the character defining qualities and features of buildings within historic neighborhoods and provide guidelines for accommodating needed maintenance and change while preserving and enhancing those qualities and features. They emphasize best practices of historic preservation and specifically address issues associated with preservation and stewardship within historic neighborhoods.

Buildings within Webster's historic neighborhoods are relatively simple and the application of appropriate preservation principles to their care is easy to understand. Most of the Town's historic residential buildings are constructed of wood and have simple straightforward detailing. The key principle in their care is the retention of historic building fabric and features.

Vinyl siding has been applied to most residences within the neighborhoods. While not a preferred preservation treatment, it does not necessarily harm the building so long as window, eave, and siding trim is retained and not removed or covered. Webster's stone mill residences, while being most significant, are still simple in their detailing and relatively easy to maintain.



Many of Webster's historic residences are relatively simple wood buildings that are easy to appropriately maintain. Design guidelines can help inform property owners about best practices in the treatment of historic buildings.

The Design Guidelines are a resource to inform decision making about change over time. Rather than providing an answer for every situation, the guidelines outline concepts and principles important to the character of historic buildings and suggest how they may be applied. Every situation presents a combination of issues and opportunities that may differ depending upon their context. The information and guidelines included here will help property owners and designers appreciate and respond appropriately to varying situations and issues.

RECOMMENDATION 3J: Prepare design guidelines for the treatment of Webster's historic buildings for use by property owners. Priority two recommendation to be undertaken by the Webster Historical Commission.

Design guidelines were recently prepared for the City of Worcester to guide change within the city's local historic districts. These guidelines are available online and would be useful in Webster as well. In the short term, the Webster Historical Commission could post these on its website as part of the public outreach campaign recommended in the previous section of this chapter. Over the longer term, the guidelines could be customized to specific conditions in Webster.

Most important are the three final chapters of the Worcester design guidelines:

Chapter 5, Historic Building Materials, reviews common issues and appropriate treatments for types of materials commonly used in historic buildings, including various roofing materials, wood, masonry, stucco, and metals.

Chapter 6, Historic Building Features addresses issues and treatments associated with key features in historic buildings, such as roofs and related features; siding, detailing, and trim; entrance and doorways; windows and window treatments porches; and site features.

Chapter 7, Additions and New Construction, provides guidelines for the design of additions to historic buildings and the design of new buildings in an existing historic context.

Design Guidelines are a resource for the owners of historic properties throughout the Town. The topics outlined and guidance provided in the design guidelines are applicable to any historic building and historic neighborhood and will inform decision making when any maintenance or construction project involving a historic building is being contemplated.

Posting of Worcester's guidelines on the Webster Historical Commission's website and promotion of their use should be an early action in accordance with public outreach. The preparation of more detailed and customized guidelines for Webster can be undertaken later.

Local Historic Districts

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts authorized local municipalities to designate Local Historic Districts under Massachusetts General Law Chapter 40C, known as the Historic Districts Act. In a Local Historic District, a locally appointed Historic District Commission reviews proposed changes to exterior architectural features visible from a public way.

Local Historic Districts are used by many historic communities throughout the Commonwealth and are the most effective tool in preserving the character of a historic neighborhood. Property values are known to rise in Local Historic Districts because of their preservation.

Local Historic Districts are the most effective tool in preserving the character of a historic neighborhood.

When a proposed change is planned, the property owner submits an application to the Historic District Commission describing the change and its impacts on the

historic building. The Historic District Commission holds a public meeting at which the proposed change is reviewed. Upon review and discussion, the Commission makes a determination as to whether the proposed change is appropriate. Often there is back and forth between the Commission and the property owners with some modifications to the submission until agreement is reached.

If the proposed change is deemed appropriate, the Historic District Commission issues a Certificate of Appropriateness, and the work may proceed. Often design guidelines are used to aid both the property owner in understanding what is expected and the Historic District Commission in its decision-making.

The process for establishing a Local Historic District is described in MGL Chapter 40C and includes a preparation of a study document, public engagement, and two-thirds approval at Town Meeting.



Several residences in Webster's historic neighborhoods serve as models of appropriate treatment and care and reinforce the character of surrounding properties.

In Webster, it is recommended that Local Historic Districts be designated for North Village and South Village because of their historical significance and the importance of their preservation.

RECOMMENDATION 3K: Designate North Village and South Village as local historic districts in accordance with Massachusetts' Historic Districts Act.

Priority two recommendation to be undertaken by the Webster Historical Commission with approval by Town Meeting.

Establishment of North and South Villages as Local Historic Districts is a high priority action, but it is necessary to lay the groundwork for its acceptance by building public support, especially from property owners. Nomination as a

National Register Historic District, discussed earlier in this chapter, is recommended first in order to build public awareness such that the importance of Local Historic District designation might be recognized. National Register listing is largely an honorary recognition and does not involve local regulatory review. It is hoped that National Register recognition and the public outreach program discussed above will help property owners within North and South Villages appreciate how Local Historic District designation is important in enhancing and protecting their property investments.

Many proposed changes within a Local Historic District are exempt from review. In a Local Historic District there is no review of interior features. In addition, a variety of exterior features are often exempt, such as air conditioning units, storm doors, storm windows, paint color, roofing, and temporary structures. Bylaws adopting a Local Historic District may be customized to this purpose.

An additional benefit of designation of Local Historic Districts would be to enable Webster to become designated by the Massachusetts Historical Commission as a Certified Local Government providing the Town with access to additional grant monies and technical assistance. See the description of Certified Local Governments in Appendix B of this preservation plan. Having a Local Historic District is a requirement of Certified Local Government designation.



Covering of a historic brick residence with rigid insulation and vinyl siding as in the photo at left is an inappropriate treatment. Original wood siding is found under the applied vinyl siding in the building at right and may be re-exposed and restored.

Neighborhood Conservation Districts

Neighborhood Conservation Districts are similar to Local Historic Districts but follow a much simpler process in which design review is undertaken by a designate Neighborhood Conservation District Commission in accordance with a set of simple design standards. The design standards may be enumerated in the Neighborhood Conservation District bylaw and are usually much less stringent than those for a Local Historic District.

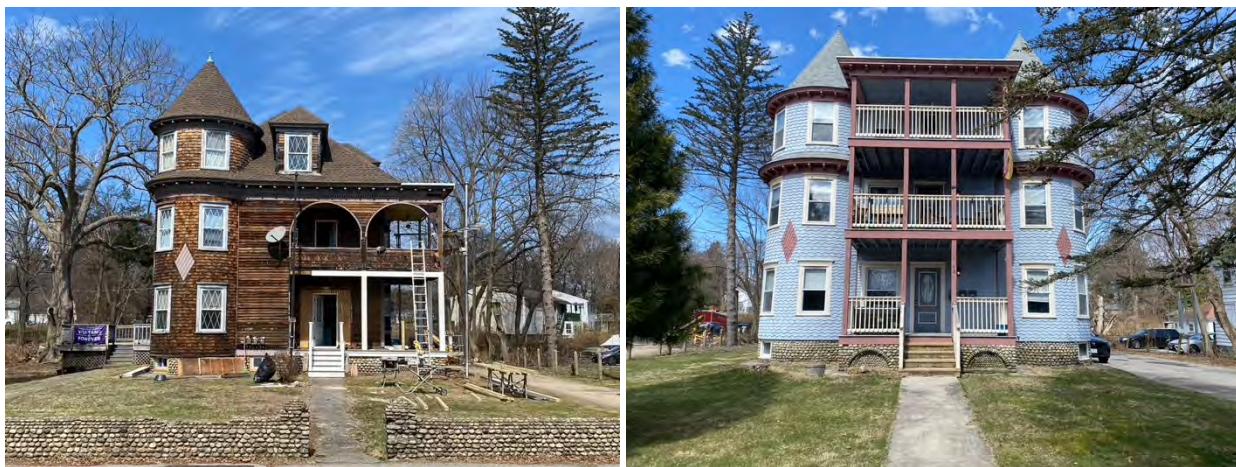
Neighborhood Conservation Districts are used for historic neighborhoods and areas where changes are occurring but where the complications of a full Local

Historic District are not desired or warranted. Town staff may be authorized to undertake routine project reviews by the Neighborhood Conservation District Commission without the time delays necessitated by review of the full Commission. Subcommittee members of the full Commission may be consulted or involved in staff reviews as appropriate.

In Webster, it is suggested that the broad area of historic neighborhoods outside of North Village and South Village discussed in the inventory section of this chapter could be designated as a Neighborhood Conservation District. Designation could be limited to specific neighborhoods where there is support or for the entire historic area.

RECOMMENDATION 3L: Designate historic neighborhoods outside of North Village and South Village as Neighborhood Conservation Districts. Priority three recommendation to be undertaken by the Webster Historical Commission with approval by Town Meeting.

Public support for a Neighborhood Conservation District must be built over time through engagement and discussion. It might be easier to accomplish once other historic preservation initiatives have been undertaken and made their mark. Specific neighborhoods could be approached area by area where there may be support, and energy for designation could come from the grassroots, from the neighborhood property owners themselves, which would be ideal. Town staff and the Historical Commission could make neighborhoods aware of this option where interest is expressed and can advocate for local grassroots initiative generally.



Two well-cared-for multi-family residences on Lake Street.

Design guidelines for Neighborhood Conservation Districts are simplified and are intended only to prevent the worst. They are not as detailed or rigorous as may be required for a full Local Historic District. Guidelines focus on preventing the loss of historic features (such as porches) and building fabric (such as wood detailing) when exterior changes are made. Treatments that may not be allowable in a full Local Historic District – such as installation of vinyl siding – may be allowed within a Neighborhood Conservation District so long as measures are taken to retain historic fabric and detailing. Such measures often allow the otherwise inappropriate treatment to be reversible at a later date.

Authority for the establishment of Neighborhood Conservation Districts is provided under Home Rule. The preparation of a Neighborhood Conservation District bylaw for Webster should be coordinated with the Massachusetts Historical Commission (MHC) and use examples from other Massachusetts municipalities as models. Some municipalities have created Neighborhood Conservation Districts that are more stringent than Local Historic Districts and have been challenged in court for such action. The purpose of a Neighborhood Conservation Districts is just the opposite—to be simpler.

Neighborhood Associations

Neighborhood associations are informal organizations serving as vehicles through which local residents engage, that represent neighborhood interests, and that can be used to increase public awareness about local historic resources. Neighborhood associations are usually created through local grassroots initiative in neighborhood areas that self-identify. Some neighborhood associations become formalized by becoming non-profit organizations.

Webster's varied neighborhoods have distinct identities and developed during different historic periods in response to different historic trends. The layout, patterns, and buildings associated with each neighborhood convey the stories of the neighborhood's development and the lives of people who resided there.

Neighborhood associations are a means through which neighbors can undertake joint projects enhancing their neighborhoods. They are a sign of a neighborhood with capabilities and that deserve attention and resources.

RECOMMENDATION 3M: Encourage and support the establishment and operation of neighborhood associations where there is local interest and energy. Priority three recommendation to be undertaken by Town staff and the Board of Selectmen.

Town staff can encourage and support the establishment of neighborhood associations where there is grassroots interest and energy. Many (mostly urban) municipalities throughout the Commonwealth use neighborhood associations as grassroots organizing elements within their communities. They use neighborhood associations as a primary means of communication with residents.

Town support to neighborhood associations can include administrative assistance, basic funding for supplies and organizational needs, provision of meeting space, use of Town communication media, and some staff support. For grassroots activists, neighborhood associations are a means of getting things done to the benefit of the neighborhood and of advocating to and communicating with Town leadership.

The Webster Historical Commission can use neighborhood associations to raise awareness about the historic character of neighborhoods and historic preservation. They are an ideal way to engage with property owners on historic preservation topics. Once established, the Historical Commission can assist neighborhood associations with historical information on their neighborhoods

and individual buildings, interpretation of historic neighborhoods, information on appropriate treatment of historic buildings, and enhancement projects of historic places.

Workshops, guidelines, and technical assistance can be offered through neighborhood associations to provide information to local property owners on the appropriate treatment of historic buildings.

Municipal Rental Property Programs

Many urban municipalities enact rental property programs to assure that rental properties are code compliant with respect to health and safety for protection of renters, especially when renters may be low income and when building maintenance and blight in residential areas is a problem. Webster does not appear to have such a problem, though much of its housing stock is multi-family and a proportion of its population is low income.

Building and life safety code compliance is the responsibility of Webster's Building Department, which monitors conditions, issues building permits, and undertakes inspections of construction projects. . Other than the State Building Code, Webster does not appear to have a separate property maintenance code.

Poor property maintenance and blight do not appear to be systemic problems in Webster's historic residential neighborhoods. Nor does building vacancy appear to be a problem in residential areas. In some locations, individual residential and commercial buildings appear to be vacant or underutilized and are not well maintained. These situations appear to be rental properties where landlords have not invested in proper maintenance or where other extenuating circumstances are present.



Inappropriate changes such as the removal of the two-story front porch from this historic multi-family rental property and the removal of historic door, window, and other wood detailing when installing vinyl siding diminish the historic character of the building.

Webster's Building Department should continue to monitor conditions where property maintenance is an issue, not only for life safety but also to help support the right of adjacent property owners to have a reasonably well-maintained neighborhood.

With respect to code compliance in historic neighborhoods, required remediation measures should not permit the loss or degradation of historic building features or building fabric. Measures should be implemented in a manner that retains a building's character defining features.

The demolition of problem buildings should only be undertaken as a last resort. Code violations should be cited early enough in the process to prevent demolition by neglect.

A persistent challenge in struggling historic neighborhoods with a high percentage of rental properties is the difficulty in getting landlords to properly care for and maintain their properties. Strategies for neighborhood revitalization and blight remediation focus on increasing home ownership and improving property maintenance, however where the majority of buildings are multi-family, increasing home ownership is not a potential solution. Rather, making sure that landlords maintain their properties is necessary.

The character and profile of landlords in Webster is not clear and was not available in planning documents reviewed in the preparation of this Historic Preservation Plan. Problems with absentee landlords or with blight in residential neighborhoods were not cited in interviews. However, the low income and transient nature of a segment of the renting population in Webster suggests that building maintenance and life safety compliance could be issues.

Webster should consider initiating a program aimed at gathering information on and engaging with rental property owners and landlords to encourage their cooperation in neighborhood revitalization, which should be in their interest. Common remediation tools available to municipalities with respect to rental properties, include:

- Adoption and enforcement of property maintenance codes;
- Rental property registration, licensing, and inspection;
- Vacant property registration; and
- Pre-sale inspections.

It is recommended that Webster undertake an initial step toward engagement with rental property owners by enacting a landlord registration program to obtain contact information and other basic information on rental property owners. The program would enable the Town to communicate with landlords through email, mail, and by phone, engaging with them on neighborhood revitalization matters and gathering information on their interests and concerns.

Inappropriate building maintenance is the most significant threat to historic neighborhood character and revitalization in Webster.



This historic multi-family residence retains its historic integrity even though it is in need of maintenance and repair. Appropriate maintenance will enhance the building, raise its value, and contribute to revitalization of the surrounding neighborhood.

RECOMMENDATION 3N: Initiate a landlord registration program and modest yearly fee to assure that contact information for absentee landlords is on file and can be accessed with regard to properties with maintenance issues.

Priority two recommendation to be undertaken by the Board of Selectmen and Building Department staff.

From a historic preservation and neighborhood revitalization perspective, it is important to acknowledge the importance of building and maintenance code and inspection programs not only for life safety but also with respect to preserving historic neighborhood character. Historic preservation principles should be incorporated into code compliance and blight remediation planning and implementation, working to strengthen existing historic neighborhood resources as a revitalization strategy.

RECOMMENDATION 3O: Incorporate historic preservation principles into code compliance, neighborhood revitalization, and blight remediation planning and implementation. *Priority two recommendation to be undertaken by the Town Planning and Building Department staff.*

One measure that could be undertaken is to provide historic preservation training to building code officers so that when they address life safety issues with property owners they take rehabilitation goals into consideration, encouraging appropriate treatment of historic buildings and helping to educate property owners on a day-to-day basis. The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties should be consulted when enforcing property maintenance in historic neighborhoods.

Building Department staff should proactively intervene to stabilize and address issue with neglected buildings to prevent the level of deterioration that would lead to a need for demolition. Demolition should only be considered as a last resort under extreme condition. Loss of historic building stock should be prevented.

Some communities have adopted affirmative maintenance or demolition by neglect bylaws that allow the Town to step in to stabilize and make repairs to problem properties to prevent deterioration. Such bylaws often cover a wider range of issues and conditions than those that may generally be addressed by a building commissioner or board of health. Costs to the Town for such actions are recouped by placing a lien on the property which must be satisfied before the property may be sold. While not a current recommendation of this plan, the Town of Webster should consider this option should circumstance arise.

Cemeteries

The Town of Webster owns and maintains two historic cemeteries, Mount Zion Cemetery located on Old Worcester Road just north of East Village and Lakeside Cemetery on Lower Gore Road on the east side of Webster Lake. Three private Catholic cemeteries are located Old Worcester Road, Saint Joseph Cemetery, Sacred Heart Cemetery, and Saint Anthony Cemetery, each historically associated with their respective churches downtown.

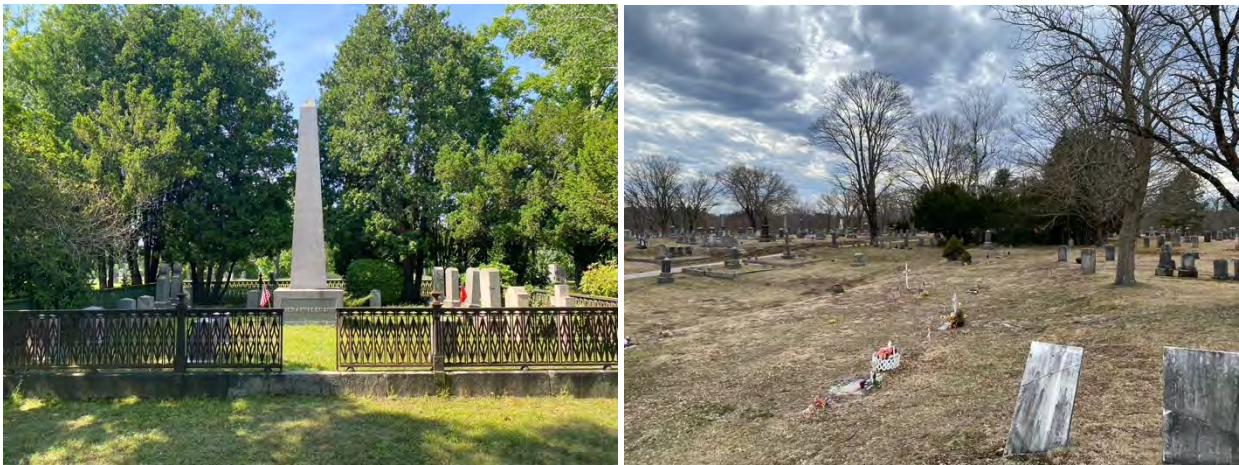
Mount Zion Cemetery includes some of the oldest and most historically significant grave sites in Webster, including those of Samuel Slater and his family. Mount Zion and Lakeside Cemeteries are operated and maintained by Webster's Department of Public Works. Routine maintenance is limited primarily to grass mowing.

Additional cemetery maintenance is needed. Historic portions of the historic cemeteries should be identified for special recognition and treatment by the Town. In these areas, a number of grave markers and monuments have been broken or displaced. Many are lying on the ground. A long-term program of study and rehabilitation should be undertaken.

RECOMMENDATION 3P: Undertake a long-term program of oversight and restoration of Webster's historic Town-owned cemeteries. Priority three recommendation to be undertaken by the Webster Department of Public Works and Historical Commission.

Cemetery stones are among the oldest and most significant historic resources in Webster. Their condition should be assessed, and they should be properly maintained. Cemetery stones may also be considered historic works of art.

With approval from the Town Administrator, the Historical Commission should engage with the Department of Public Works, to identify issues and challenges in maintenance of the historic cemeteries and to provide guidance and support. A great deal of experience has been had in the care and maintenance of cemeteries and cemetery stones in Massachusetts which the Historical Commission and Department can draw upon.



The Slater family memorial in Mount Zion Cemetery (left) should be a preservation focus and should be interpreted for residents and visitors. Historic portions of the Town's cemeteries (right) should be identified, inventoried, and restored. They may also be used as featured visitor destination for interpretation of the Town's history.

The Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) has prepared guidance for the management of historic cemeteries. The 2009 publication *Preservation Guidelines for Municipally Owned Historic Burial Grounds and Cemeteries* provides information on the historical background, preservation planning, recommendations for management, and case studies for cemeteries.

The 2011 publication *Terra Firma, Putting Historic Landscape Preservation on Solid Ground, A Guide to Identification and Protection* commemorated the tenth year of DCA's Massachusetts Historic Cemetery Preservation Initiative and reviews issues and best practices as they have evolved. In addition, the National Park Service has a Preservation Brief on the preservation and treatment of historic grave markers.

Among the actions that should be taken under oversight of the Historical Commission:

- Continue to perform **appropriate routine maintenance** of Webster's historic cemeteries. Provide training to Department of Public Works staff as outlined in the publications noted above. Be careful that maintenance work does not damage historic features and is undertaken using historically appropriate techniques as outlined by the Massachusetts Historical Commission.
- Through CPA funding, undertake the inventory, assessment, and phased **restoration and conservation of cemetery headstones** and other features. Use professional consultants and follow established conservation protocols.
- Over the long term, prepare **cultural landscape reports** for Webster's historic cemeteries providing information on their history and significance and providing treatment guidance for their long-term care. CPA funds may be used for this task as well.

- Interpret Webster's historic cemeteries as part of the **Townwide interpretive program** as outlined in the next chapter of this Historic Preservation Plan. Provide information, outdoor exhibits, and visitor amenities.

Some communities have relied upon friends' groups associated with cemeteries for their care and maintenance. Such possibility may be explored for Webster.

Conclusion

A variety of measures may be taken to recognize and encourage the appropriate treatment of historic buildings in Webster, especially in historic residential neighborhoods. Town government has a small staff and a limited number of volunteers serving on boards, commissions, and committees such that it must be strategic in its actions, staying within its capabilities and building those capabilities over time. The recommendations included above are intended to raise public awareness about Webster's historic buildings and neighborhoods and their contribution to quality of life in the Town. Phased implementation of these recommendations should reinforce the Town's ongoing efforts toward revitalization and economic vitality.



Charming early 20th century single family residence on North Main Street.



CHAPTER 4

PLANNING AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Webster's approach to preservation planning seeks to engage with broader community planning and economic development initiatives and identify preservation strategies that not only coordinate with those initiatives but that place historic resources and preservation concepts at the center of their successful implementation. Chapter 4 looks at planning initiatives and opportunities appropriate to different areas of Webster and suggests preservation planning approaches aligning with broader community goals as expressed in planning work.

Appendix D of this preservation plan, *Planning Context*, provides an overview of Webster's planning documents over the past two decades. Most prominent are the Town of Webster Master Plan (2014), Open Space and Recreation Plan (2018), and several targeted corridor and economic strategy studies prepared between 2020 and 2024.

Webster is one of 40 communities that are part of the Central Massachusetts Planning Region and are served by the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC). Founded by the Massachusetts legislature in 1963 as one of 13 regional planning agencies across the Commonwealth, the CMRPC

provides a variety of planning services to regional municipalities and has assisted Webster with several of its recent planning documents.

The CMRPC is based in Worcester and is leading stakeholders in development of a regional comprehensive plan called *Imagine 2050*, which is projected to be completed by the end of 2024. The plan is currently in the visioning phases and cannot be used in the preparation of this preservation plan. However, a regional Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy completed by CMRPC in 2023 provides strategies underpinning ongoing comprehensive planning and includes goals, objectives, and actions from which Webster can draw.

Webster should establish itself as a player in the region's planning and economic development strategy, defining a role for itself taking advantage of the Town's assets and strengths.

RECOMMENDATION 4A: Actively participate in the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission's development of a regional comprehensive plan, *Imagine 2050*. Define a targeted role for Webster within the plan taking advantage of the Town's assets and strengths. Priority one recommendation to be undertaken by Town staff under the direction of the Board of Selectmen.

One of the primary advantages Webster has is its location on Interstate 395 which connects Worcester and Interstate 90 (Mass Turnpike) twelve miles to the north of Webster with Interstate 95 in Connecticut to the south. I-395 has three interchanges in Webster, with the interchange at East Main Street in East Village being the primary connection.

I-395 provides Webster with a regional connection that enhances the potential for economic development in the historic town. In the immediate vicinity of the interchange, economic development has already occurred, demolishing the historic East Village mill and related residential areas and replacing them with commercial development serving both the interstate and the town. While not good for historic preservation, new commercial development at the interchange was probably inevitable and can perhaps provide an anchor that will benefit economic transformation of downtown and surrounding neighborhoods.

The regional goal for Webster should be for its historic core to become a regional attraction for small business, services, and residential living, serving as a traditional main street village and downtown. Historic character, livability, and quality of life amenities are central to its appeal. Webster is transforming into a **commuter suburb** for Worcester and the surrounding region. Webster Lake is also a premier regional recreational attraction and a stable asset strengthening the local economy.

As recommendations for this Historic Preservation Plan were being prepared, the Town of Dudley published a planning document titled, ***Dudley Gateway: A Revitalization Plan*** (June 2024). Prepared by the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission, the Dudley Gateway Plan includes a number of the same recommendations proposed in Webster's Historic Preservation Plan, including recommendations for branding, mill district redevelopment, greenway trails, public art, and a Main Street approach to revitalization. Implementation of the two plans should be closely coordinated.

The regional goal for Webster should be for its historic core to become a regional attraction for small business, services, and residential living, serving as a traditional main street village and downtown.

RECOMMENDATION 4B: Coordinate with the Town of Dudley on implementation of the Dudley Gateway Plan, this Historic Preservation Plan, and other Webster economic development and revitalization initiatives.

Ongoing recommendation to be undertaken by Town staff and Town boards and commissions under the direction of the Board of Selectmen.

Dudley and Webster share the east-west Main Street corridor and the north-south French River mill district and greenway. Several joint planning documents have been prepared in recent years addressing Main Street and the French River (discussed in other sections of this chapter), though coordinated implementation has not been strong.

Similar to Webster's planning goals as expressed in its 2014 Master Plan and other planning documents and initiatives, the primary objectives of the Dudley Gateway Plan are to facilitate compact, mixed-use development and redevelopment; enhance streetscape aesthetics; and improve infrastructure to foster active mobility, safety, and accessibility.

The Dudley Gateway Plan seeks to cultivate a distinctive Town identity and create a welcoming environment that attracts residents and visitors to Dudley's vibrant business district. The Dudley plan provides guidelines for sign and facade improvements and strategies to fund the enhancement of West Main Street's aesthetic appeal. Considerations for enhancing walkability, bikeability, and connectivity to nearby trails are central to the design framework. Coordination with the Dudley Gateway Plan is discussed further below in relevant sections of this chapter.



Historic 1868 Main Street Bridge over the French River connecting Webster and Dudley, an inventoried historic resource for both towns. Towers of the historic Stevens Mill in Dudley are in the background.

PROMOTING HISTORIC WEBSTER

Economic growth and prosperity provide opportunities for community enhancement through creative growth management strategies leveraging public and private investment to achieve broad community goals. A primary focus in growth management should be given to identifying, preserving, and enhancing the historic character of the built environment, both Townwide in Webster and within individual neighborhoods.

Historic and cultural resources are defining features of community character and identity. Municipal policy and planning initiatives should recognize the role of historic and cultural resources in local quality of life and place a strong emphasis on their preservation. With this in mind, Webster's planning and economic growth strategies should take advantage of the Town's historic character to the greatest extent possible.

The following four topics are baseline strategies in using planning for community enhancement in Webster.

Town Policy and Planning Leadership

Town leadership in policy and planning is provided by the Board of Selectmen and Town Administrator in their management, directives, and allocation of resources. Over the past two decades, Webster's Board of Selectmen has supported innovative planning and economic development initiatives and implementation measures that have strengthened community character in the Town's historic Downtown core, recognizing the importance of historic resources. Most of these initiatives have been supported through grants from state and federal programs.

The Board of Selectmen has participated in the preparation of this Historic Preservation Plan and expressed interest in its recommendations. The Board of Selectmen is essential in providing leadership to Town departments, staff, boards, and commissions in municipal policy, management, the allocation of resources, and the implementation of Town programs.

RECOMMENDATION 4C: Continue to provide leadership in establishing Town policies that recognize and enhance the historic character of the built environment and allocate the necessary resources toward their realization. *Ongoing recommendation to be undertaken by the Board of Selectmen.*

The Board of Selectmen should continue to implement and expand initiatives recognizing the role that historic and cultural resources play as character defining features in community identity, character, and local quality of life. They should oversee the inclusion of historic preservation values, principles, and processes into Town policy, planning, and programs at all levels of municipal activity. Webster should continue to take advantage of available state and federal programs that support and help implement the Town's planning vision.

Identity and Branding

An important step Webster can take in emphasizing community character is adoption of the Town's historic character as the identity Webster projects to the public it is trying to attract. Identity and branding should be key marketing tools central to the Webster's economic development strategy of making Downtown a regional hub of public activity and promoting its historic neighborhoods to regional audiences as desirable places to live and invest.

Identity and branding support economic development by projecting a visual impression to residents and visitors that is recognizable, appealing, and immediately communicates a sense of quality and expectation. Branding is critical in creating a visual presence and in conveying Webster's message about quality of life. The graphic identity that Webster should adopt as an aspect of branding should establish visual communication that is immediate and experiential.

While Webster's 2014 Master Plan and other economic development studies make note of the Town's unique history, they do not, however, suggest using that history to project community identity or brand. They do not take advantage of Webster's unique history as a marketing tool, which is a missed opportunity. Identity and branding should have been the first step in crafting an economic development strategy for Webster, especially given its unique story.

While many New England towns have mills, and several towns have mills associated with Samuel Slater, no New England town is so closely connected to Samuel Slater and his family. Samuel Slater is known as the "Father of American Textile Manufacturing" and "Father of the American Industrial Revolution." His impact on New England's industrial development was profound and widely recognized. Slater's decision to concentrate his endeavors in Webster, and in fact create the Town, is foundational. The Slater family's presence in Webster and their management of its mills tracks the history of the American Industrial Revolution for over a century, from 1811 into the early 20th century.

Webster should make the most of its history by adopting Slater as its identity and brand and proactively projecting this brand as central to its marketing.

Webster should make the most of its history by adopting Samuel Slater as its identity and brand and proactively projecting this brand as central to its marketing.

RECOMMENDATION 4D: Adopt Samuel Slater and the Slater family's mill history and story as Webster's identity and brand to be prominently used in marketing and economic development. Priority one recommendation to be undertaken by the Board of Selectmen and Webster's economic development stakeholders.

Creation of a Slater brand for Webster places the Town's history at the center of its identity and economic strategy. Its implementation emphasizes using historic character and historic resources for economic benefit, aggressively promoting Webster's Downtown, mill districts, and historic neighborhoods as economic attractions.

Webster's branding should be developed as part of a broader **creative marketing campaign** for use in economic development and promotion. The broader campaign should include development of a graphic identity and messaging as well as the means by which they will be used to promote Webster.

The Town should retain a **marketing and design consultant** to assist in development of its identity and brand and in the development and implementation of its marketing campaign going forward.

Webster should **coordinate** its marketing campaign with that proposed for the Town of Dudley in its Gateway Plan, which suggests using Merino Village as the basis for Dudley's Main Street brand, which relates to the Samuel Slater brand proposed for Webster.

A **graphic identity** should be developed for Webster visually conveying its Slater brand. The graphic identity should be appropriate for use in marketing products associated with the Town's promotion, such as the Town's website, wayfinding, advertising, brochures, publications, orientation materials, Town documents, interpretation, maps, and other media formats and materials.

Design of Webster's graphic identity should include a Town logo, related graphic elements, fonts, colors, and other components. It should be developed for use in a variety of anticipated formats and media and in coordination with the creative marketing campaign for the Town.



Logos used by the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Area in Massachusetts and Rhode Island and The Last Green Valley National Heritage Area in Connecticut and Massachusetts as part of their branding and graphic identity.

Guidelines should be established for use of the Town's graphic identity by the Town and by stakeholders and partners in their promotion. Use of Webster's graphic identity by stakeholders and partners should be encouraged but closely monitored and only undertaken by permission and adherence to the Town program's guidelines.

Webster's proposed graphic identity should:

- Convey and communicate Webster's Slater mill identity;
- Express the Town's character and quality of life;
- Convey Webster's small-town accessibility and friendliness.
- Be easily recognizable under the variety of conditions of its use;
- Be easy to use and adapt to different formats;

- Convey a sense of enjoyment and fun in the experience of Webster's Downtown, mill district, and historic neighborhoods; and
- Also embrace and be associated with Webster Lake and its recreational context.

The marketing campaign developed for Webster should use the graphic identity and brand in promoting the Town in a variety of media as may be available.

Marketing and promotional campaigns generally include:

1. Defining a **Brand Promise** and corresponding public-facing messaging for Webster to inform and inspire unified communications and advertising.
2. Using the Slater history to create a **Campaign Theme** guiding marketing and communications going forward.
3. Preparing a **Campaign Toolkit** for use by the Town and its stakeholders and partners.

Marketing campaigns often begin with development of a Creative Brief as an internal document describing the concept and embodying the Brand Promise, the creative vision, and key messaging points for the public-facing campaign. The Creative Brief serves as a foundation for future communication decisions, providing direction for the marketing and promotional actions.

A unified and creative Campaign Theme should be prepared around the concept of Webster's character and the Slater story, reflecting the Brand Promise and intended for general market advertising, promotion, and communications. The Campaign Theme may be presented for use in a variety of media formats.

A Campaign Toolkit provides a working toolkit of graphic materials developed as part of the graphic identity for use and repurposing by the Town's and stakeholder's marketing staffs going forward. The toolkit generally includes a detailed primer on how and where materials are to be used, including a campaign summary, downloadable graphics, and print-ready materials with use guidelines and examples. The Campaign Toolkit provides the graphic basis for development of additional promotional formats.



Preserved tower from Slater's East Village mill on East Main Street.

Community Preservation Act

Chapter 2 discusses the importance of the Community Preservation Act as a program Webster can adopt to fund historic preservation projects and initiatives enhancing quality of life in the Town. As discussed there, the CPA enables adopting communities to raise local dedicated funds for open space preservation, preservation of historic resources, development of affordable housing, and the acquisition and development of outdoor recreational facilities.

CPA funds are raised locally through imposition of a voter-authorized surcharge on local property tax bills of up to 3%. These local funds are matched by annual distributions to the community from the state's Community Preservation Trust Fund, a statewide fund held by the Massachusetts Department of Revenue. Webster property owners currently pay into the state Trust Fund without receiving any returns. Adoption of the CPA will not only provide Webster with access to this state funding, it also demonstrates local support for investment in quality of life initiatives as a basis for other potential grant opportunities.

The importance of the CPA is reaffirmed in this chapter because its adoption and use is an investment in projects that implement creative, forward thinking planning and economic development strategies. These projects are talking points for use in Webster's marketing and promotion.

RECOMMENDATION 4E: Use Webster's adoption of the Community Preservation Act and resulting projects as demonstration of the Town's commitment to quality of life initiatives. *Priority two recommendation to be implemented by the Board of Selectmen and Webster's economic development stakeholders.*

Suggested steps toward adoption of CPA by Webster are outlined in Chapter 3. Town staff, the Board of Selectmen, Historical Commission, Conservation Commission, Webster Housing Authority, and other local preservation, conservation, and recreation entities should support and collaborate in working toward adoption of the Act.



Adoption of the Community Preservation Act will provide funding for desired open space and recreational projects at Webster Lake and elsewhere in Webster.

Context Sensitive Design

While this Historic Preservation Plan emphasizes community character and the preservation of historic buildings, it recognizes that Webster's ongoing economic revitalization will also include new construction and change. When changes occur within a historically significant area, such changes should be designed in a manner that is respectful of the existing historic context, which is known as context sensitive design.

New construction that is well designed and of high quality can make interesting and meaningful contributions to a historically significant area by adding creative visual elements that respond to and reinforce established patterns and context. As communities and lifestyles change, buildings and neighborhoods often need to adapt and evolve to accommodate new situations and needs. Buildings are routinely adapted in response to changes in contemporary living and how buildings and properties are used.

Desired building changes often include new everyday entrances related to driveways where residents park; larger, modernized kitchens; new informal dining areas and family rooms; larger and increased numbers of bathrooms; and outdoor decks and terraces. Some older historic buildings were modest and very small when originally constructed—part of their inherent charm—but have been expanded with additions over time, adding needed interior living space.

Desired neighborhood and community changes often include new commercial uses providing needed services to residents or mixed uses intended to economically revitalize an area. Webster's Master Plan, for instance, calls for new mixed-use infill projects that simultaneously provide new housing types along with retail uses serving surrounding residents. New uses may be accommodated in historic buildings and historic neighborhoods in ways that allow the building or neighborhood to evolve while still preserving their historic character.

Chapter 1 of this Historic Preservation Plan includes a discussion of historic preservation principles that recognize context sensitive design and the incorporation of needed change. The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Buildings, also discussed in Chapter 1, addresses needed change as well.

New buildings are sometimes constructed in historic neighborhoods, filling spaces where buildings have been lost for various reasons and increasing density where space allows. Webster's mill districts and some of Webster's historic neighborhoods have significant opportunity for new buildings to be added where vacant lots are currently present. Such new construction can help strengthen the historic neighborhood by attracting investment, bringing in new owners, and filling unnatural gaps in the neighborhood fabric where they exist. The construction of new buildings will continue to occur in historic neighborhoods throughout Webster. Context sensitive design is helpful in facilitating appropriate design and implementation.

RECOMMENDATION 4F: Encourage the use of context sensitive design that helps new construction to relate positively to its historic surroundings.

Ongoing recommendation to be implemented by the Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, and Webster's economic development stakeholders.

The challenge in historic preservation is to accommodate desired change in a way that reinforces rather than diminishes historic neighborhood character, whether addressing an addition to an existing building or a completely new building. New buildings should be designed in a manner that is compatible and sympathetic to the character of the historic neighborhood, ensuring that the character and integrity of surrounding historic resources are preserved. New buildings should be consistent with the site layout, orientation, scale, form, materials, features, and detailing established by surrounding structures. The design of new additions to existing historic buildings should relate to the character and appearance of the specific existing building to which it is attached.

Inappropriate additions and changes can diminish the integrity of a historic building or neighborhood. Carefully designed additions and changes that are sensitive to historic character can enhance neighborhood character as well as new uses.



These new buildings use traditional forms in a contemporary manner to help fit within their surrounding historic contexts, a new retail building in a historic commercial area at left and new multi-family housing in a historic neighborhood at right.

The character of a historic neighborhood relies upon the visual continuity and interplay established by the presence of similarly designed and harmonious buildings. Yet, individuality is important as well. Webster's historic neighborhoods are comprised of a number of different residential building types designed during different periods for different owners. Together, both the continuity and individuality of historic buildings combine to create neighborhoods of distinctive character.

New buildings that are added to a historic neighborhood should express their individuality while relating to their context. They should speak of the time in which they are built in a contemporary way that is respectful of their historic surroundings. They should not seek to replicate historic buildings or styles,

though they may choose to reference historic styles in their design. While contemporary to their time and place, new buildings constructed in Webster's historic areas should fit in and contribute positively to the overall character of the neighborhood.

Webster can incorporate context sensitive design into its requirements for new construction in a variety of ways. Local Historic District designation and Neighborhood Conservation District designation, discussed in Chapter 3, are preferred for historically significant neighborhoods. Webster's Planning Board has the authority to review the design of proposed new projects as outlined in the Zoning Bylaw (Sections 650-55 & 57) and should use that authority to promote context sensitive design. Planning Board negotiations during the land development process can be important, especially when concessions and approvals such as Special Permits are needed. Webster should make it clear that context sensitive design is highly desirable in its land development standards. Design guidelines for new construction would help inform the design of proposed new buildings within Webster's historic neighborhoods.

Webster can encourage context sensitive design through the land development review process.



Though contemporary in design, Webster's Gladys E. Kelly Public Library contributes positively to the character of the historic Municipal Buildings National Register Historic District through the high quality of its design.



Similarly, this contemporary apartment building was constructed within a historic mill district, relating to its context while being thoroughly contemporary in design.

DOWNTOWN WEBSTER

Webster's historic downtown commercial area developed over the late 19th and early 20th centuries, beginning as Depot Village with the opening of the Norwich and Worcester Railroad along the French River in 1840 and growing into a mature regional commercial center by the 1870s and 1880s. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places in the early 1980s, buildings within the Downtown core include two- and three-story brick commercial buildings constructed between 1875 and 1925.

Following the closing of mills in Webster by the mid-20th century, the historic Downtown fell into decline with loss of retail and other businesses. Several of Downtown's historic buildings have been demolished over the years, leaving gaps in the streetscape. Nonetheless, the overall historic integrity of the Downtown streetscape remains intact.

Continuing Revitalization

Beginning about 2005, the Town of Webster began focusing its economic development strategies toward the revitalization of Downtown, undertaking a number of significant improvement projects over the years that have transformed the physical landscape and laid the groundwork for renewal. An initial commercial property improvement program sought to fund façade and signage improvements. Planning documents from 1989 to the present summarized in Appendix D of this plan trace Webster's continued focus on Downtown revitalization.

The demographics of Webster's Census Designated Place (CDP) and 2010 designation of Downtown's deteriorated conditions as blighted under state and federal criteria allowed the area to be eligible for access to federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding which has been instrumental in Downtown's physical revitalization. Downtown's blight designation was extended in a study completed in 2021 and currently under review by the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Urban Development, which will allow continued access to CDBG funding for another ten years.



Webster's Downtown Riverwalk and French River Park implemented in phases since 2010.



Behind-building parking and French River Park, part of Downtown's revitalization.

Phased implementation of the Webster Riverwalk and French River Park began in 2010, the same year that rehabilitation and adaptive reuse of the Sitkowski School next to Town Hall and adjacent to Downtown was undertaken. Phased improvements have included the construction of parking behind the historic commercial buildings, the reworking of pedestrian and vehicular circulation, and significant streetscape improvements along Main Street, including replacement of water and sewer lines, roads, curbs, sidewalks, and new lighting. Construction of the Gladys E. Kelly Public Library adjacent to Town Hall and Downtown was completed in 2018. The fourth and final phase of the Riverwalk improvements are scheduled for construction in the fall of 2024.

These improvements have transformed Downtown Webster. Adaptive reuse and new construction by MAPFRE Insurance, Webster's largest employer, for offices Downtown have contributed significantly to revitalization. While the Covid epidemic placed a pause on momentum, Downtown Webster is close to realizing its goal of transformation into an active regional service center. The Town is currently meeting with commercial property owners Downtown to plan additional steps to be taken. This Historic Preservation Plan commends the Town for the significant revitalization work it has completed and urges them to continue.

RECOMMENDATION 4G: Continue to focus on the phased revitalization of Downtown Webster. *Ongoing recommendation to be implemented by the Board of Selectmen and Webster's economic development stakeholders.*

Downtown Webster's character and appeal is based on the character of its historic building stock, which is widely recognized and accepted in the Town's planning documents and initiatives. National Register designation allows property owners to make use of **federal and state rehabilitation tax credits**, which should be considered if property owners plan to undertake substantial rehabilitation of their buildings.

Among the issues property owners face is the vacancy of upper floor levels, which is exacerbated by the lack of elevators. While use of federal rehabilitation tax credits generally involves a substantial project, use of Massachusetts state rehabilitation tax credits is friendly to smaller projects and should be considered

by property owners for needed rehabilitation projects, such as installation of elevators.

An overview of federal and state tax credit programs is provided in Appendix B of this preservation plan. The use of federal and state rehabilitation tax credits requires adherence to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, a set of best practices for historic preservation discussed in Chapter 1.

RECOMMENDATION 4H: Consider the use of federal and state rehabilitation tax credits in the rehabilitation and improvements to historic Downtown commercial buildings. Priority two recommendation to be implemented by Downtown commercial property owners with support from the Town.



Downtown Webster with streetscape improvements and other significant enhancements.

Though designated as a National Register Historic District, no local regulatory controls are in place to ensure that historic buildings are preserved and appropriately treated. National Register designation is a mostly honorary recognition and places no obligations upon property owners.

Though not currently perceived to be under threat, it would be in the interest of the Town's investment in Downtown as well as in the interest of property owners to have Downtown Webster designated as a Local Historic District in order to guide future changes to historic buildings, including façade changes, such that the historic character of buildings is preserved and enhanced. The background and use of Local Historic Districts is discussed in Chapter 3.

RECOMMENDATION 4I: Consider establishing Downtown Webster as a Local Historic District to guide future rehabilitation and change. Priority two recommendation to be implemented by the Board of Selectmen, Historical Commission, and Webster's economic development stakeholders.

Business Improvement District

A Business Improvement District (BID) Feasibility Study was prepared for the Town of Webster by the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC) in 2023 to explore the applicability of the BID model to Downtown Webster. The study provided a snapshot of what a BID could look like in the community and offered alternative models for Downtown revitalization for the Town to consider.

BIDs are special assessment districts in which property owners vote to initiate, manage, and finance supplemental services or enhancements above and beyond those municipal services already provided. BIDs use funds raised from assessments on participating property owners to provide a range of services to the district, such as economic development, maintenance and beautification, marketing and events, landscape and streetscape enhancements, and security.

BIDs are nonprofit entities managed by a Board of Directors comprised of property owners or their representatives. The local municipality collects the established property assessments on behalf of the BID and disburses the funds to the BID's management entity.

Webster's BID study analyzed the feasibility of two potential BID districts, the first limited to Webster's downtown core (Main Street and South Main Street) and the second extending the entire length of Main, South Main, and East Main Streets from the French River to the I-395 interchange.

Webster should implement a BID as a marketing and enhancement strategy to provide funding for services needed to function as a successful Downtown center. Consider coordinating the BID as a joint initiative with Dudley in its implementation of the Dudley Gateway Plan.

RECOMMENDATION 4J: Implement a Business Improvement District (BID) as envisioned in the 2023 study prepared for Webster. Priority two recommendation to be implemented by Downtown property owners in coordination with the Town.

As analyzed, the first district option above would raise \$162,154 a year based on an assessment fee of .0035 of assessed value per property, which would be enough to cover proposed program costs. The second district option would raise \$318,868 using an assessment fee of .002 of assessed value, which would be enough to cover proposed program costs.

Main Street Manager

Closely associated with the potential for a Business Improvement District (BID) is the importance of implementing a Main Street program for Downtown Webster. Main Street programs are proven techniques for the revitalization of historic downtown centers. With its infrastructure improvements and other enhancements, Webster has already adopted portions of the Main Street four-point approach. Lacking is the ongoing staff work a Main Street Manager would provide in proactively attracting high quality restaurants, services, and stores; organizing events; and marketing.

The National Main Street Program was created in 1977 by the National Trust for Historic Preservation through the introduction of three pilot projects in communities in Illinois, Indiana, and South Dakota. Based on the success of these pilot projects, follow-up Main Street programs were established in six states in 1980. Statewide and regional Main Street programs are managed through accredited “Coordinating Programs” that work with local communities across the state or region.

Since 1980, the National Trust’s Main Street Program has expanded to include many local communities and coordinating programs. As of 2020, there were 860 nationally accredited local Main Street programs and 44 state or regional coordinating programs. These designated programs follow best practices in Main Street revitalization, including support of a full-time Main Street Manager to implement the program locally.

In 2014, the National Trust’s program was spun off as an independent non-profit subsidiary called the National Main Street Center, Inc. Today it does business as Main Street America.

Massachusetts does not have a state Main Street program, but many successful Massachusetts communities use the Main Street approach, some as official accredited members and others unofficially by simply adopting the approach.



The Main Street approach is a proven means of revitalizing historic downtown centers. Webster has begun implementing the approach through its Downtown revitalization initiatives.

The Main Street approach is implemented through work in four broad areas, known as the Four Points:

- **Economic Vitality** focuses on capital, incentives, and other economic and financial tools to assist new and existing businesses, catalyze property development, and create a supportive environment for entrepreneurs and innovators that drives local economies.

Main Street’s focus on creative economic restructuring involves (a) analyzing current market forces to develop a long-term strategic approach customized to the individual community; (b) strengthening

the competitiveness of existing merchants and service businesses, recruiting new businesses, and diversifying the economic base; (c) creatively converting unused space for new uses; and (d) seeking appropriate solutions for historic commercial buildings that ensure their continued occupancy, maintenance, and preservation.

- **Design** supports a community's transformation by enhancing the physical and visual assets that set the downtown center apart. Most importantly, design focuses on preserving and enhancing the historic character of the downtown center.

In the early stages of a Main Street program, achieving high visibility before-and-after rehabilitations of historic storefronts is a common activity and "best practice." This work often includes implementation of grant-supported facade improvement programs that helps to build momentum for downtown revitalization. This design element also includes keeping the downtown area clean; implementing public improvements; and encouraging creativity in storefront and directional signage, street furniture, lighting, and public art.

- **Promotion** positions the downtown area as the center of the community and a hub of economic activity while creating a positive image that showcases the community's distinctive character. Many participating communities establish Main Street organizations focusing on this element. Individual businesses' marketing activities are supplemented with collective promotional activities, including marketing and events.
- **Organization** involves creating a strong foundation for a sustainable revitalization effort, including cultivating partnerships, community involvement, and resources for the downtown center. Business and property owners associated with the historic downtown and other supporters are encouraged to organize and hire at least one full-time staff person to serve as Main Street Manager. Some level of public funding is usually a part of the organization's financial sources.

Main Street programs focus on quality and authenticity—they make the downtown come alive. Main Street initiatives emphasize collaboration by bringing partners together in mutual support. They emphasize finding the fit for the individual community, balancing the needs of residents and visitors to ensure that programs and services benefit everyone. It is important to understand and plan for the specific kind and amount of visitation that the individual community can handle.

RECOMMENDATION 4K: Implement a full Main Street program in Downtown Webster with a Main Street Manager coordinating programs. Priority one recommendation to be implemented by Downtown businesses and property owners in coordination with the Town.

Webster is in a strong position for implementation of a Main Street program to help bring its Downtown revitalization initiative to fruition. In addition to its focus as a regional and community center, Downtown Webster has a built-in

target market at Webster Lake, with lakeside visitors and residents looking for somewhere interesting to go.

A Main Street Manager is needed to coordinate the effort, proactively recruit businesses and services Downtown, organize events, and undertake promotion. Webster's small economic development staff does not have the capacity to perform these needed services. The Main Street initiative could be a shared program with Dudley in implementation of the Dudley Gateway Plan, and it could be funded through the BID as discussed in the previous section.



Restaurants are probably the most important business type to recruit for Downtown.



Example of wayside signage design types prepared for a community in Pennsylvania.

Wayfinding

Webster is in need of a wayfinding system to complement its streetscape improvements and help guide visitors to key locations throughout the town. Most important for Downtown revitalization is to direct visitors from the I-395 interchange to the Downtown center. Webster Lake locations will benefit from wayfinding as well, as will primary attractions such as the Samuel Slater Experience.

Webster's wayfinding system should be developed in concert with its branding and graphic identity, discussed earlier in this chapter. It should reflect the Slater

brand and use colors, fonts, logos, and other design elements adopted as part of the graphic identity. The wayfinding system should also be coordinated with Dudley in their implementation of the Dudley Gateway Plan.

RECOMMENDATION 4L: Design and implement a wayfinding system for Webster reflecting the Town's proposed Slater brand and graphic identity.
Priority two recommendation to be implemented by the Town in coordination with businesses, attractions, and property owners.

THE FRENCH RIVER MILL DISTRICT

Historic mill towns across Massachusetts and New England have undertaken the adaptive reuse of their mill districts over the past four decades, revitalizing their historic communities. Such revitalization was spurred by enactment of the federal Historic Preservation Tax Incentives program enacted in the 1970s and which gained widespread use in the 1980s. Recognizing the success of the federal program in the revitalization of historic communities, Massachusetts enacted a state level Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credit program of its own in 2004 supplementing and reinforcing the federal program. The federal and state programs are outlined in Appendix B of this Historic Preservation Plan.

Mentioned regarding Downtown revitalization in the previous section of this chapter, the federal and state tax credit programs can be instrumental in the revitalization of Webster's French River Mill Districts focusing on historic North Village and South Village. Webster's East Village mill area, adjacent to the I-395 interchange, was demolished and redeveloped as a commercial shopping area after its mills closed in 2009.

Webster has been a decade or two behind other communities in addressing revitalization of its mill districts, choosing to focus its limited resources first on Downtown. With Webster's Downtown area in progress, it is important to turn to the next opportunity in revitalization of its historic mill districts, which will reinforce overall Downtown and community revitalization by attracting new renters and drawing attention and investment to adjacent historic mill neighborhoods. Timing is good — there are many good examples to follow.



The historic mill district in North Andover, near Lawrence, was rehabilitated in 2010.

Owner/Developer Support and Recruitment

Most important is for the Town of Webster to actively support private sector developers interested in and capable of undertaking mill rehabilitation projects. There are two such current initiatives within the French River Mill District, the Stevens Mill in Dudley and the Perry Yarn Mill in North Village. Webster has provided support for the Stevens Linen Works project, as outlined below, but is not actively involved. Webster has not yet been involved with the proposed Perry Yarn Mill project.

RECOMMENDATION 4M: Actively engage with and support private sector developers interested in and capable of undertaking mill rehabilitation revitalization projects. *Priority one recommendation to be implemented by the Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, and economic development staff.*

The historic **Stevens Linen Works** is located in Dudley off of Main Street immediately west of the French River and Downtown Webster. Its prominent granite main building was constructed about 1862 and is well suited for rehabilitation. The Stevens Linen Works was designated as a National Register Historic District in 2010, including the large main building, additions, and other related buildings in the vicinity. National Register designation qualifies the property for use of federal and state rehabilitation tax credits, as mentioned above.

Known locally as the Stevens Mill, rehabilitation planning began in 2020 when the almost 7-acre mill property was purchased by a Columbia, SC based development company. Planning for the project proceeded, including approvals by the National Park Service and Massachusetts Historical Commission for use of federal and state tax credits. An announcement in February 2023 stated that development was set to begin, but construction has not yet started. The rehabilitation will produce 156 rental apartments and cost \$53 million.

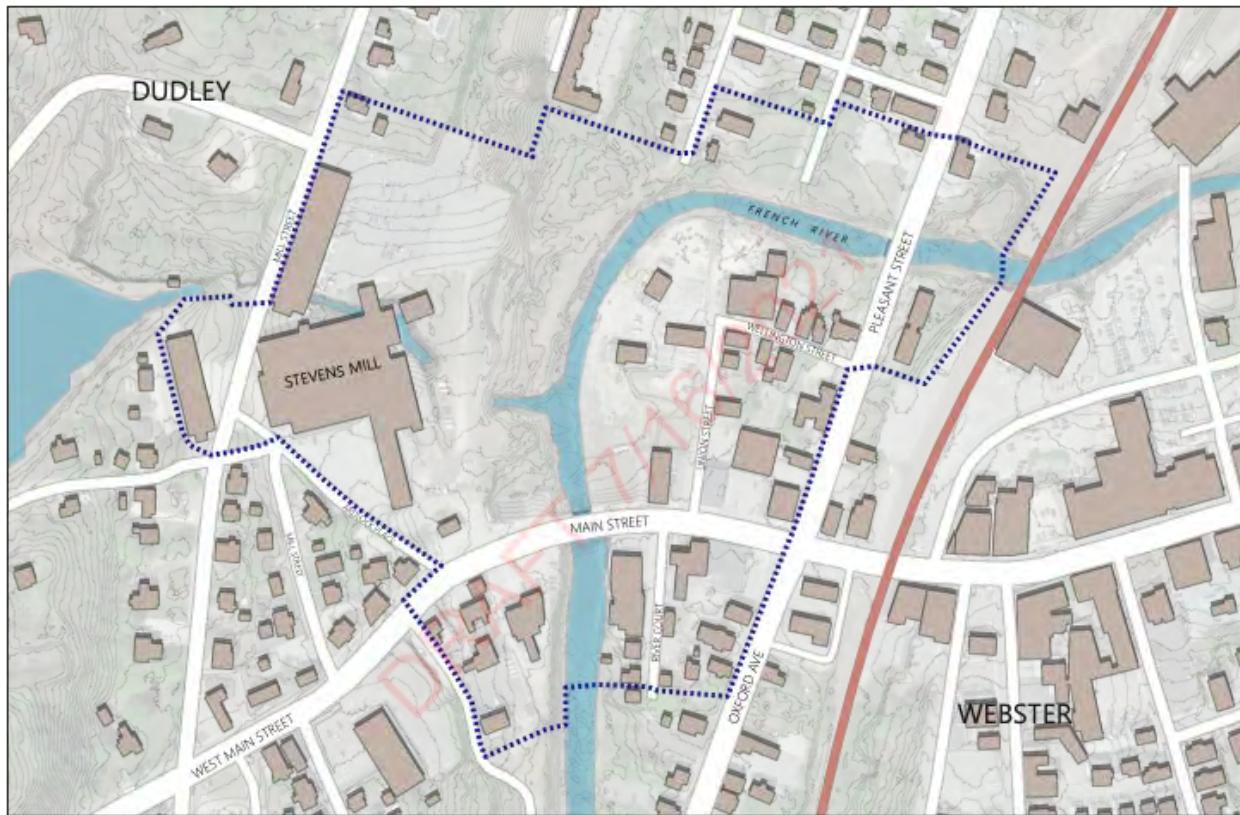
In support of rehabilitation of the Stevens Mill and other potential projects, the Towns of Dudley and Webster established an Urban Center Housing Tax Increment Financing District (UCH-TIF) along the French River in 2021, under approval of the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development, now known as the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities.

Tax Increment Financing (TIF) is a method for financing new development projects using anticipated taxes on future gains in real estate values to pay for the necessary public improvements such as streets, sidewalks, sewer and water, and similar improvements that make private sector development projects possible. The towns borrow the needed funds for the project by issuing bonds, which are then paid back to the bond holders using a portion of the higher taxes generated by the project. TIFs are authorized by state law and begin with designation of a geographic area as a TIF district.

The French River UCH-TIF District contains sixty-one properties, including residences, offices, restaurants, and retail operations. Per the Zoning Bylaws of both towns, commercial and multi-family residential development is allowed on all of these properties either as-of-right or via special permit. Rehabilitation and

adaptive reuse of the Stevens Mill and associated improvements within the French River UCH-TIF District are a major rehabilitation effort significant to both towns. Their implementation should continue to be actively supported. The project will:

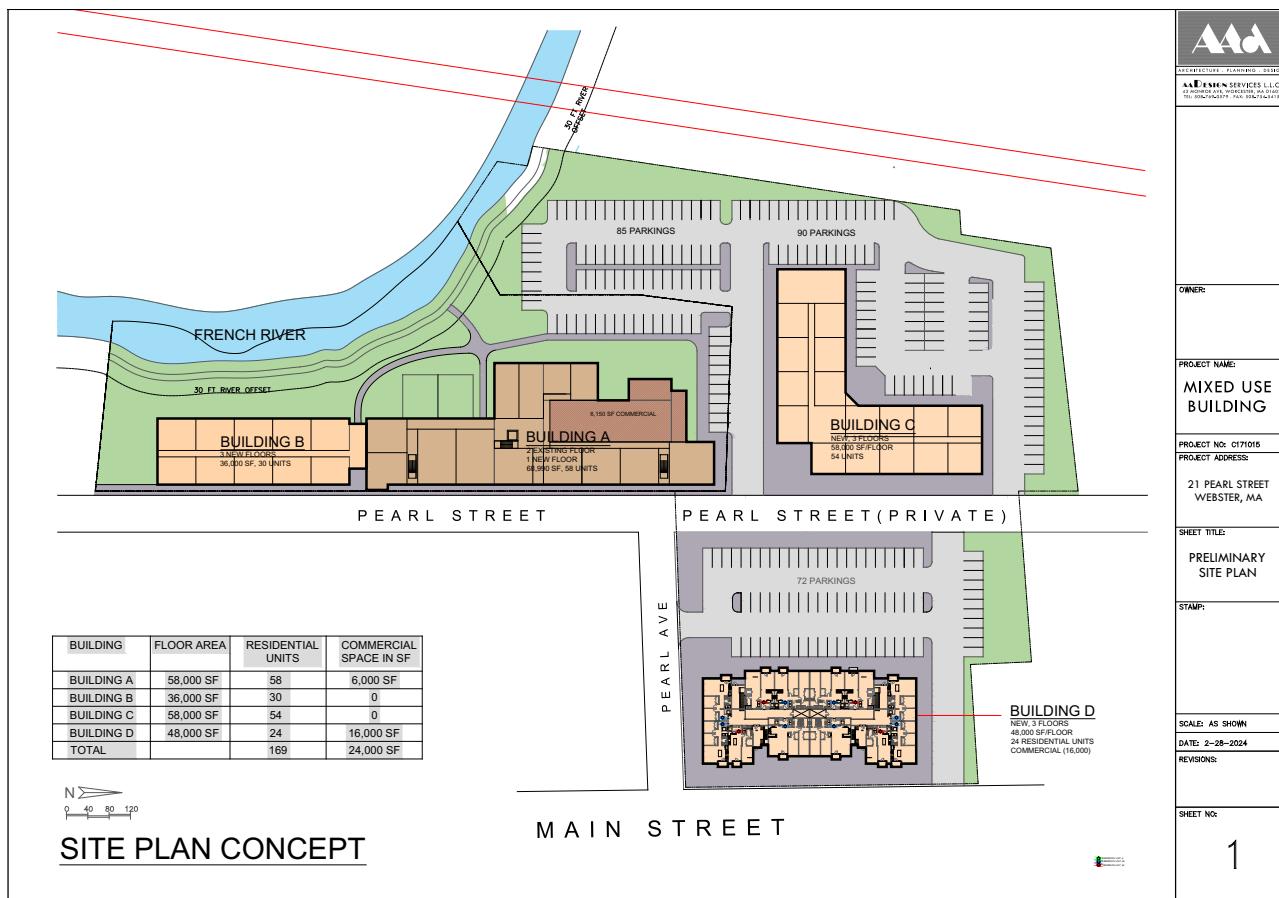
- Provide attractive market rate multi-family housing,
- Revitalize existing businesses along the Webster-Dudley Main Street corridor,
- Encourage additional mixed-use development of other French River Mill District industrial sites,
- Promote rehabilitation of adjacent historic mill neighborhoods,
- Encourage infill development to fill in vacant parcels, and
- Restore access to the French River and implement a portion of the French River Trail.



The Webster-Dudley French River UCH-TIF District



Rendering of the proposed rehabilitated Stevens Mill.



Conceptual plan for rehabilitation of the Perry Yarn Mill with proposed new adjacent apartment buildings.
(Plan courtesy of 21 Pearl Street LLC)

A second private sector project within the mill district currently in the planning stages is the rehabilitation of the historic Perry Yarn Mill at 21 Pearl Street, the southern end of Webster's North Village. Being undertaken by a group of investors based in the Worcester area, the project will include rehabilitation of the historic mill building constructed in 1901 into apartments and three new adjacent apartment buildings on vacant land where former mill buildings were demolished.

Online records indicate that the Perry Yarn Mill was submitted to the National Park Service for Part 1 review for listing on the National Register in October 2023, which would enable use of state and federal rehabilitation tax credits. Part 2 preparation of architectural plans for approval by the National Park Service as required for the tax credit process is ongoing along with securing of financing.

Both the Stevens Mill and Perry Yarn Mill projects should be actively supported by the Town of Webster. It does not appear that Webster's Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, or economic development staff or stakeholders have yet reached out to the developers of the Perry Yarn Mill.



The Perry Yarn Mill on Pearl Street in Webster's North Village.

Master Plan

Additional planning is necessary for the revitalization of Webster's French River Mill District. An assessment should be undertaken of the potential for the rehabilitation and adaptive reuse of surviving mill buildings in North Village and South Village; assessment should be undertaken of the potential for new buildings along the lines of those proposed for the Perry Yarn Mill; and planning for new public infrastructure necessary to support redevelopment should be undertaken, including planning for and implementation of extension of the Riverwalk from Downtown through North Village.

RECOMMENDATION 4N: Prepare a master plan for redevelopment of the French River Mill District including the historic industrial areas of South Village and North Village. Priority one recommendation to be implemented by the Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, and economic development staff.

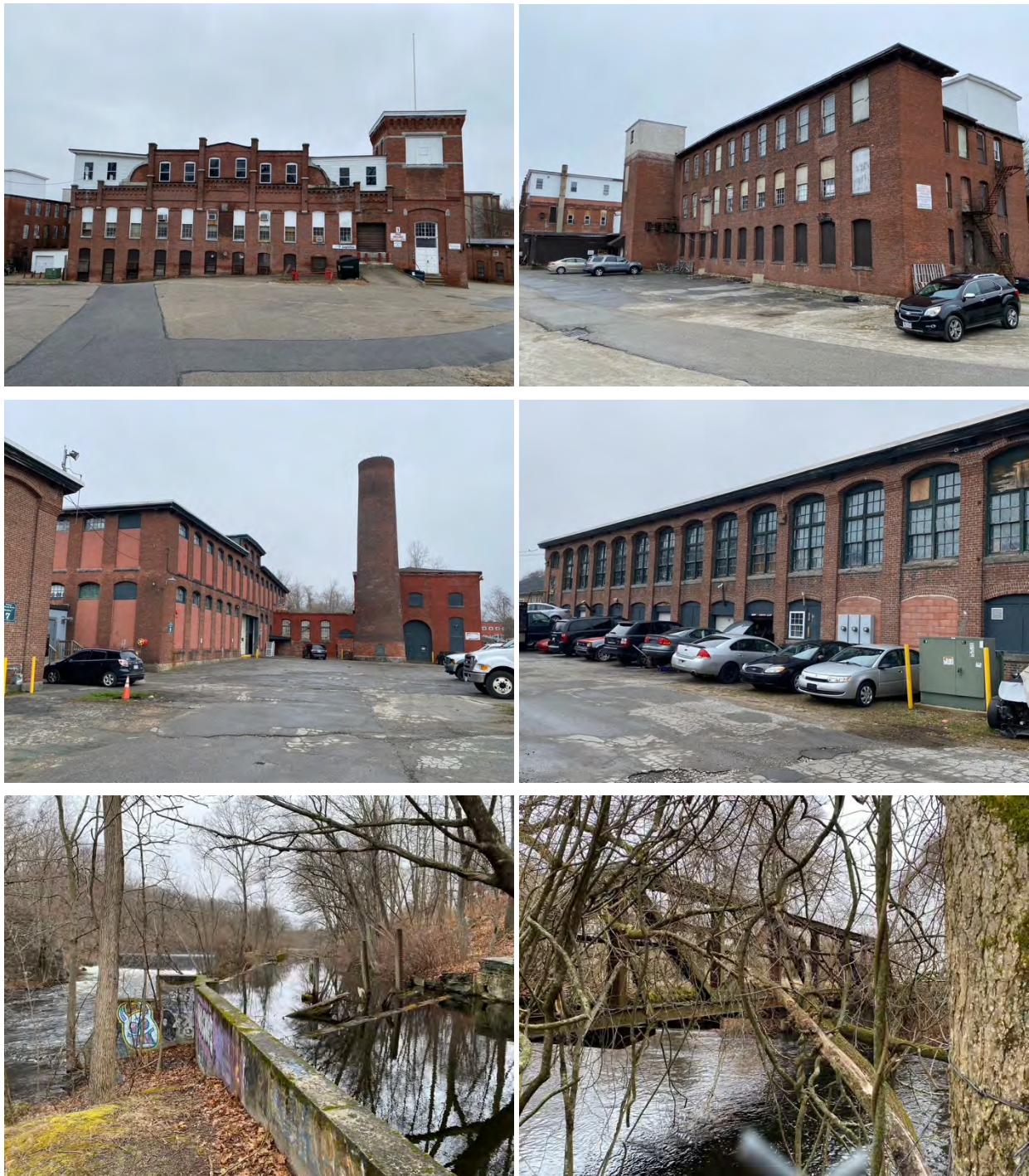
The first step in undertaking the redevelopment of the French River Mill District is preparation of a master plan that assesses the potential for redevelopment and outlines the design concept. Such planning could be undertaken by the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission with grant support from the state or other sources. (See potential funding sources listed by CMRPC in the Dudley Gateway Plan.)

The proposed master plan should document existing conditions in an engineering base survey plan. Identified historic site features documented in the survey plan, such as foundations, raceways, ruins, and other features, should be preserved and incorporated into the master plan's conceptual design. Existing buildings should be preserved for rehabilitation and adaptive reuse. Webster's North Village and South Village mills were reviewed in detail in the Town's 2000 historic resource inventory, which will provide background information for the sites and their remnant features.

Redevelopment of the French River Mill District is a long-term project that will be undertaken in phases. Different surviving buildings will have different potential reuses. The master plan is the essential first step in planning and assessment of development potential and phasing priorities. Once that potential is determined, the Town can discuss potential implementation projects with private sector developers.

An additional step that could be undertaken during or immediately following the master planning process is the proactive survey and pursuit of National Register district nomination of surviving mill buildings, which would eliminate a step in their future redevelopment using federal and state tax credits. CPA and MHC grant funds may be used for such survey and nomination work.

The success of the Stevens Mill and Perry Yarn Mill projects will provide proof of concept and momentum. The Webster-Dudley French River UCH-TIF District may provide a model for public improvements associated with long-term development. Webster's implementation of its Downtown revitalization projects demonstrates the Town's capabilities in undertaking such a long-term vision.



Surviving historic buildings and site features in Webster's French River Mill District — South Village buildings at top, North Village buildings in the middle, and South Village dam, raceway, and bridge at bottom.

French River Trail

Enhancement of the French River has been a focus of local and regional planning efforts for many years, dating back to the 1990s. A series of planning studies have laid the groundwork for transformation of the French River from an industrial resource into an open space and recreational resource:

- **French River Greenway Plan** prepared in 1990 by a citizens advisory group provided a resources inventory of natural and cultural resources, envisioned protection of the riverine ecosystem with a riverwalk and park system, and outlined suggestions for making the river a community resource.
- **The French-Quinebaug Watershed Plan** prepared in 1999 by the Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, provided comprehensive background about the watershed, including its landscape character, hydrology, biodiversity, and settlement patterns, and it provided a preliminary vision for future growth scenarios.
- **French River Revitalization Concepts** prepared in 2006 by French River Connection with the Green Valley Institute and landscape architecture students from the University of Connecticut laid out conceptual plans for trail systems along the French River in Webster, Dudley, and Oxford. The 2006 plan presented conceptual plans for open space, trails, and river access for Collins Cove, the North Village, Downtown Webster, Stevens and Ethan Allen Mills (Dudley), and Perryville Step Dam.
- **Open Space and Recreation Plans** for Webster, Dudley, and Oxford cited the French River Greenway as a priority open space and recreational project.

To date, however, only the Riverwalk and French River Park in Downtown Webster have physically implemented the vision. The proposed Stevens Mill rehabilitation project, discussed above and on the verge of being implemented, is expected to improve the French River shoreline and install its portion of the trail on the Dudley side of the river. The Perry Yarn Mill project, also discussed above, is poised to construct its portion of the trail as it is developed.

Webster should undertake planning for the phased design and construction of the trail, extending the Riverwalk from Downtown Webster northward through North Village. While such planning could be undertaken as part of the master plan for the French River Mill District discussed above, it is suggested that separate targeted planning be undertaken in parallel with the master planning so that agreements with property owners can be completed, funding can be sought, and phased construction can begin. Conversations with the developers of the Perry Yarn Mill should begin as soon as possible.

RECOMMENDATION 40: Take the next steps in planning and implementation for extension of the Riverwalk from Downtown Webster through North Village. Priority one recommendation to be implemented by the Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, and economic development staff.



Current end of the Riverwalk in Downtown's French River Park (left). At the southern end of North Village, below the Perry Yarn Mill, the Riverwalk will need to follow a portion of Pearl Street to avoid the backyards of homes bordering the river.



Concept plan for the trail at the Stevens Mill along the Dudley side of the river. (Dudley Gateway Plan)



French River flowing adjacent to South Village.



Dammed mill pond adjacent to the North Village mill.

EAST & SOUTH MAIN STREETS

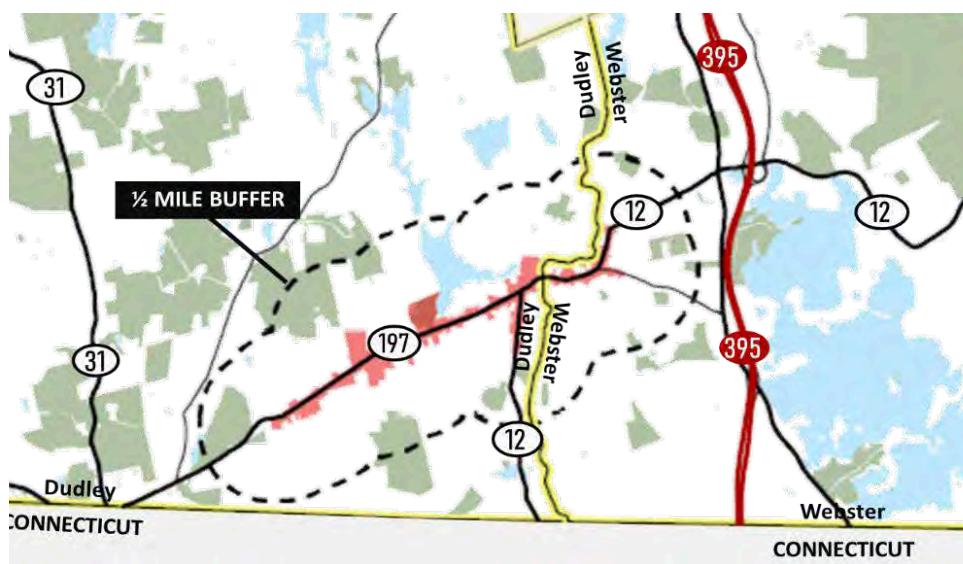
Downtown Webster connects to the I-395 interchange through South Main Street and East Main Street which over the past two decades have been developing as a suburban-style commercial corridor. Several recent studies have focused on the importance of this corridor to Webster's economic development.

In 2020, the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC) completed a Corridor Study of the shared commercial district between the towns of Webster and Dudley through a grant provided by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EEA).

The 2020 **Webster-Dudley Corridor Study** analyzed Main Street through Webster and Dudley looking at the character of the streetscape and adjacent building uses in order to make recommendations for their improvement. It advocated for a smart growth approach to development emphasizing a mix of building types and uses, diverse housing and transportation options, development within existing neighborhoods, and community engagement. Recommendations included development of the Stevens Mill, mixed use adaptive reuse Downtown, a Main Street approach to marketing and development as discussed above in this plan, and close coordination between Webster and Dudley.

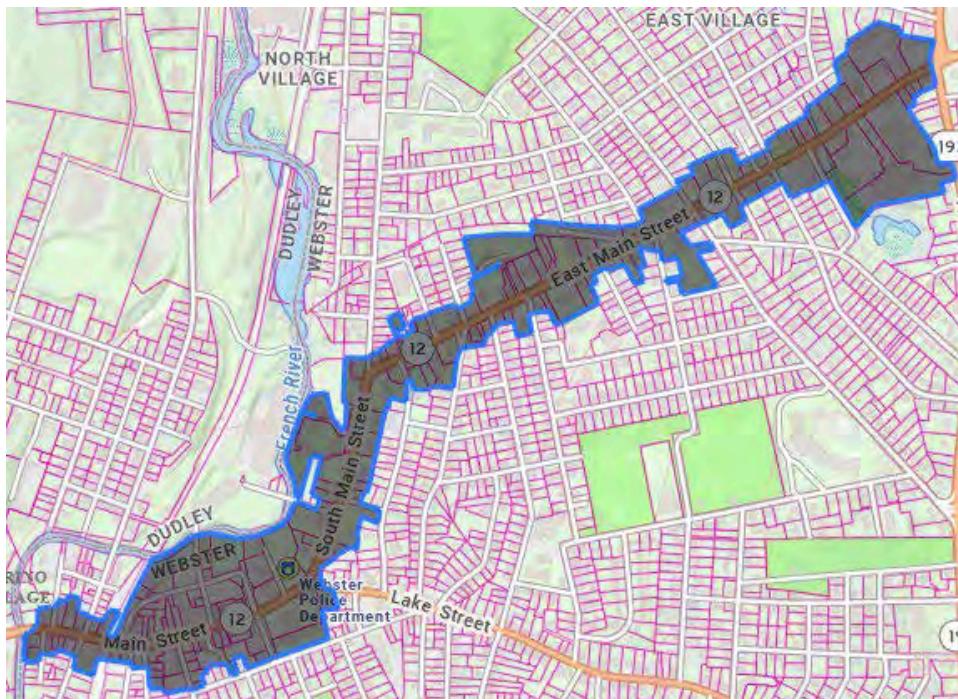
The character of the portion of Main Street in the vicinity of the I-395 interchange is important to the economic development and marketing of the Webster-Dudley corridor as a whole.

This Historic Preservation Plan embraces the recommendations of the 2020 Corridor Study and supports their implementation. The 2020 Corridor Study did not, however, extend all the way to the I-395 interchange or emphasize the importance of the I-395 link. The importance of conceptualizing and marketing the corridor as a whole is of particular importance and is supported by branding, Main Street, and other revitalization recommendations in this plan. It is important, however, that the corridor extend all the way to the I-395 interchange and that planning for the character of the corridor near the interchange be included.



Study area for the Webster-Dudley Corridor Study shown in black dashed lines.

The 2023 **Town of Webster Business Improvement District (BID) Feasibility Study** was prepared by the CMRPC to explore the applicability of the BID model to downtown Webster and included two options, a BID solely for Downtown Webster and a BID extending all the way to the I-395 interchange.



Option for a BID encompassing the entirety of Main, South Main, and East Main Streets

The previous section of this chapter on Downtown Webster encourages adoption of a BID, whether solely for Downtown or extending all the way to the I-395 interchange. Regardless, planning for the entire corridor is important, including wayfinding, as discussed above.

In planning for the Main Street corridor connecting Downtown with the I-395 interchange, its physical character and appearance should be taken into account, defining, enhancing, and strengthening its desired character over time as redevelopment occurs. The character of the Main Street corridor helps establish the character of Downtown to visitors. It should be of high quality.

Two issues important to the character of Main Street are of concern: (1) the loss of historic buildings and character, and (2) the design quality of new construction.

Historic Building Preservation & Reuse

Webster's Main Street corridor connects Downtown Webster with South Village and East Village. All three areas are of historical significance and contribute to the Town's historic character, which is central to Webster's identify and brand. Preservation and enhancement of Webster's historic character is a primary economic development strategy, as outlined throughout this preservation plan as well as in other of the Town's planning documents.

The preservation and enhancement of Downtown Webster is discussed earlier in this chapter. As also mentioned, East Village adjacent to the I-395 interchange

has been redeveloped into a services and shopping area since its mill closed in 2009. South Village retains historic integrity and should be preserved and enhanced as discussed in this plan.

As Downtown and East Village have developed over the past two decades, the Main Street corridor has transformed from a largely residential but lightly developed corridor into an emerging suburban commercial corridor. In this process, a significant number of historic buildings have been lost, altering the character of the area.

Further loss of historic buildings along the Main Street corridor should be prevented. Remaining historic buildings should be preserved and, where appropriate, adaptively reused. Historic buildings should be incorporated into proposed new commercial development.

Further loss of historic buildings along the Main Street corridor should be prevented.

This recommendation can be accomplished in a variety of ways. Some municipalities, such as Worcester, establish an **Urban Design District** in which any proposed development requiring municipal support or funding of any kind must comply with the district's design guidelines. It could also be accomplished through designation of a **Local Historic District**, as discussed in Chapter 3.

It can also be accomplished informally through **zoning, planning, and development policies** simply stating expectations that new development along the corridor should preserve and appropriately treat remaining historic buildings. In such cases, **Planning Board negotiation** as possible through Special Permit and other needed approvals is a key tool in implementation of the policy. The Planning Board should prepare a **master plan for the Main Street corridor** demonstrating how the corridor could best be developed over time including the preservation and adaptive reuse of remaining historic buildings.

RECOMMENDATION 4P: Enact policies and planning initiatives to prevent the further loss of historic buildings along the Main Street corridor. Priority two recommendation to be implemented by the Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, and economic development staff.



These two historic buildings in East Village at the intersection of East Main Street and Thompson Road are already slated for demolition for construction of a new gas station. While the gas station is important in servicing the I-395 interchange, the loss of these buildings is unfortunate. The building at left is reported to have been a guest house for visitors to the Slater mill.



Examples of historic buildings along East Main Street that should be preserved but may be adaptively reused. Historic buildings should be incorporated into proposed new commercial development.

Design Standards

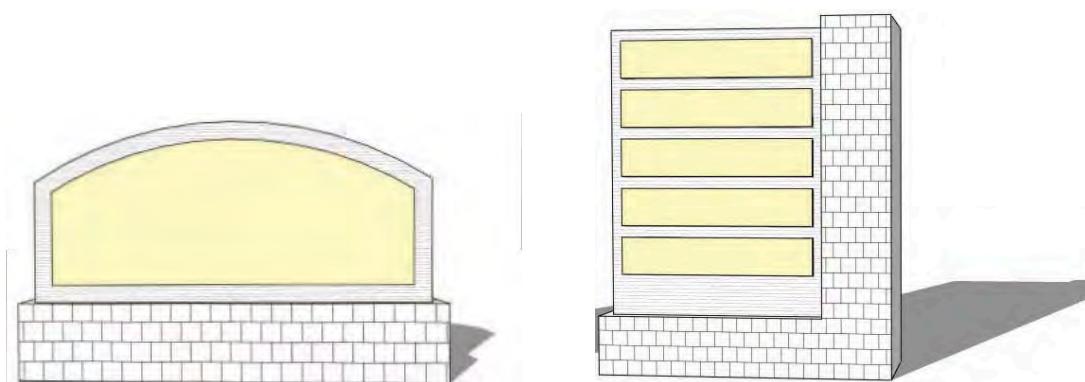
As South and East Main Streets develop into a suburban style commercial corridor, their character is impacted by the lack of high-quality design standards in Webster's zoning bylaw and subdivision and land development regulations. The Main Street corridor is devolving into an ordinary suburban sprawl roadway rather than a corridor of distinctive commercial character that would strengthen Webster's identity, enhance the entry into Downtown, and promote high-quality development.

Webster should engage the Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC) in upgrading its commercial development **design standards**. Of particular importance are signage standards that diminish visual clutter and landscape standards that include landscape islands and canopy trees. The possibility of placing overhead wires underground should be a long-term goal. The possible **master plan** for the Main Street corridor mentioned in the previous section could demonstrate how design standards might be implemented.

RECOMMENDATION 4Q: Establish upgraded design standards for new commercial development along South and East Main Streets. Priority two recommendation to be implemented by the Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, and economic development staff.



Webster's emerging suburban-style East Main Street corridor.



Creative sign standards can produce results that are effective yet appealing.



Signs can be smaller and still be effective if visual clutter is reduced.



Landscaping softens the hard, unfriendly appearance of paved roads and parking areas and can be designed to be ecologically sensitive. Street trees, when mature, create spatial scale and shade.

HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOODS

The preservation and enhancement of Webster's historic neighborhoods is a key focus of this Historic Preservation Plan. Most historically significant are the North Village and South Village neighborhoods that were closely associated with the Slater mills located there. As discussed elsewhere, little remains of the East Village neighborhood due to redevelopment adjacent to the I-395 interchange. Nonetheless, the remnants of the East Village neighborhood should be preserved when possible.

Beyond and between the historic mill villages, Webster's historic neighborhoods continued to expand through the early 20th century, especially south and east of Main Street, South Main Street, and East Main Street.

Because of their integrity and importance, Chapter 3 of this plan, *Inventory, Recognition, and Treatment*, is largely devoted to Webster's historic residential neighborhoods. Recommendations in Chapter 3 include:

- **Updating historic property inventories for North, South, and East Villages** taking into account resources that have been demolished and resources that were not previously included;
- **Inventory of historic neighborhoods beyond North, South, and East Villages** that have not been inventoried previously so they may be recognized and appreciated;
- **Nomination of North and South Villages to the National Register of Historic Places** to raise public awareness and recognition;
- An ongoing program of **public outreach** to engage and support property owners in the appreciation and appropriate treatment of their historic properties;
- Preparation of **design guidelines** for the treatment of historic buildings for use by property owners;
- Designation of North and South Villages as **Local Historic Districts** to guide their preservation and appropriate treatment;
- Designation of other historic neighborhoods as **Neighborhood Conservation Districts** encouraging their preservation and appropriate treatment;
- Encouraging the establishment of **neighborhood associations** where there is local interest and energy; and
- Initiation of **rental landlord programs** to engage and communicate with landlords.

Phased implementation of these recommendations is encouraged as priorities, preferences, interests, and capacity allow.



Representative historic residential buildings within Webster's historic neighborhoods.

WEBSTER LAKE

Webster Lake is a distinct and important residential area within the Town and the region and has a unique history separate from Webster's mill story. Also discussed in Chapter 3, Webster Lake developed largely in the early 20th century as a recreational cottage community through subdivisions and speculation. Over the decades, Webster Lake has continued to develop and intensify, with additions and new construction, impacting its integrity as a historic area or district. This change will continue into the future, as property owners continue to add to existing residences and build new residences.

Webster Lake's residential neighborhoods have not been inventoried. Chapter 3 recommends that a history of the development of Webster Lake as a recreational destination and cottage community be prepared to document and better understand its evolution.

It is recommended that an overall history of Webster Lake be prepared from its pre-European use by Native Americans to its development as a recreational destination in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In undertaking this history, areas and resources that retain historic integrity can be identified and documented. The lake's history is important not only for documentation but can be used to encourage preservation of remaining cottages and to influence potential future change around the lake. The history will help build community identity and awareness and to highlight Webster Lake as a destination and economic driver.

Webster Lake Association is an important stakeholder within the Town and should be engaged in the recommended adoption of the Community Preservation Act, which is a high priority action for the short term. Lake residents are among the most active in Town governance and volunteerism and should be engaged in community development and preservation. They are also a **primary market** for revitalization of Downtown Webster as a regional attraction with restaurants, arts, retail, and services. Downtown Webster should market to its Webster Lake neighbors and clientele.

RECOMMENDATION 4R: Recognize the importance of Webster Lake residents and visitors as a market for services provided by a revitalized Downtown.
Ongoing recommendation to be implemented by the Board of Selectmen and economic development staff.



Webster Lake is a market for revitalization of Downtown.

ZONING AND GROWTH MANAGEMENT

Webster's zoning, subdivision, and land development regulations have an important role in promoting the preservation and appropriate treatment of historic resources as renovation and new development projects are taking place. In general, it should be the policy of the Town that historic resources should be identified during the site planning and design process and that these resources should be preserved, incorporated into new development projects, and appropriately treated.

While the Town cannot legally require the preservation and appropriate treatment of privately owned historic resources in new development projects except in areas where there are specific protections, such as Local Historic Districts, it can use its authorized powers to work with and negotiate with developers toward this end. If developers know that the preservation and appropriate treatment of historic resources is expected, many will do the right thing and incorporate the resources and treatments into their projects as a matter of course simply to ensure a smooth review and approval process. Where the Town has negotiating leverage, such as with the Special Permit process where conditions can be applied and projects can be denied, the Town's influence in promoting preservation and appropriate treatment can be considerable.

The appropriate treatment of historic buildings helps preserve and strengthen neighborhood character, which positively impacts the economy and local quality of life. Webster's ordinances and regulations should reference and make use of the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties* and related guidelines in promoting the appropriate treatment of historic buildings in private sector projects. Architects and planners have decades of experience in applying the principles outlined in the Standards and achieving good preservation results while accommodating needed change.

RECOMMENDATION 4S: Incorporate preservation language into Webster's Zoning Bylaw and Rules and Regulations Covering the Subdivision of Land to encourage the preservation and appropriate treatment of historic buildings.
Priority three recommendation to be implemented by the Board of Selectmen, Planning Board, and Zoning Board of Appeals.

Chapter 650, Zoning

Webster's Zoning Bylaws are listed on the Town's website as Division 3 of the Town's General Bylaws and Zoning Bylaws and includes a single chapter, Chapter 650, Zoning. First adopted in 1967 and periodically amended and updated. The following language changes are suggested within Chapter 650

Article I, General Provisions

Under Section 650-1, *Purpose and interpretation*, add statement: *To encourage the preservation and appropriate treatment of historic buildings and To preserve and enhance neighborhood character.*

Article VII, Site Plan Review

The Zoning Bylaw outlines requirements for site plan review by the Planning Board in Article VII. Proposed projects subject to review include all proposed commercial and industrial projects and proposed residential projects involving more than two residences or residential units. Construction of single family or two-family residences are not subject to review. Construction of parking lots with fewer than five parking spaces is not subject to review.

Submission requirements include general site boundary information, topography, wetlands, and natural features. No mention is made of existing built site features or the identification and description of historic features. The following is suggested:

- Under Section 650-55, Paragraph B, *Submission requirements*, add statement: *Locations of inventoried historic buildings within 100 feet of the perimeter of the development activity.*

The Planning Board may require the submission of exterior elevations of proposed buildings, schematic floor plans, proposed exterior materials and colors, and photographs of existing and adjacent buildings. The implication is that the Planning Board may undertake design review and consideration of existing and historic buildings as noted under Section 650-57, *Decision criteria*. This authority may be used to encourage **context sensitive design**, as discussed earlier in this chapter. The following is suggested to emphasize the importance of historic character:

- Under Section 650-57, *Decision criteria*, alter statement (9) to read: *Achieve greater compatibility with the surrounding area as to building design or scale, historic neighborhood character, or site design.*

Additionally, the Planning Board may require impact studies for traffic, environmental resources, and public infrastructure. The following is suggested to permit requirement of a Historic Resource Impact Study:

- Under Section 650-55, Paragraph C, *Submission requirements*, add statement: *Historic resources impacts: impacts on historic buildings and resources in the vicinity and on historic neighborhood character in general.*

Site plan review procedures (Section 650-56) include the distribution of proposed plans to a variety of Town boards and commissions, including the Board of Selectmen, Conservation Commission, and others. The Historical Commission is not mentioned; however, the Planning Board may provide plans to any relevant board, commission, and committee for review and comment. Plans should be provided to the Historical Commission when located in proximity to inventoried historic buildings or neighborhoods.

MHC notes that the Town of Lexington has specific regulations relating to historic resources and special permit review which might be useful in considering changes to Webster's Zoning Bylaw. They allow for incentives and relief from some requirements, such as setbacks and parking, when historic building rehabilitation is involved.

Rules and Regulation Covering the Subdivision of Land

Webster's Rules and Regulations Covering the Subdivision of Land were adopted in 1954 and have been revised through March 1992. The rules state that no subdivision or related construction may be undertaken without prior approval of a subdivision plan by Webster's Planning Board.

Copies of plans submitted for subdivision review are provided to the Planning Board, Town Clerk, Board of Health, Department of Public Works, and Conservation Commission, which is responsible for wetlands and stormwater compliance. Copies should also be provided to the Historical Commission for review and comment when proposed subdivisions are adjacent to or in the vicinity of historic resources.

The process for review of a proposed site plan involves two steps, (1) review of a **Preliminary Plan** showing the basic layout and concept, and once approved, (2) review of a final **Definitive Plan** showing details as required for construction. The final plan must be in accordance with the Design Standards for subdivision included in the Rules and Regulations as approved by the Planning Board. The following additions are recommended to include the protection of historic resources within a proposed subdivision:

- Under Section I. *Purpose and Authority*, paragraph A, *Purpose*, *The Power of the Planning Board shall be exercised with due regard for*, add statement: *Protecting, promoting, and enhancing the historic character of the Town.*
- Under Section 2. *General*, (A) *Definitions*, add: *HISTORIC RESOURCE: Building, structure, or landscape feature associated with a property identified in the Town's Historic Resource Inventory or as may otherwise be identified by the Historical Commission.* And: *HISTORIC LANDSCAPE CONTEXT: The immediate landscape area associated with and significant to a historic building resource.*
- Under Section 3. *Procedures*, (A) *Preliminary Plan*, (4) *Contents*, add a paragraph requiring identification of historic building and landscape features and resources on the property being developed.
- Under Section 3. *Procedures*, (B) *Definitive Plan*, (6) *Contents*, add a paragraph requiring identification of historic building and landscape features and resources on the property being developed.
- Under Section 3. *Procedures*, (B) *Definitive Plan*, add a section titled *Historical Commission Review. Where historic resources are present within or adjacent to the property being developed, the Historical Commission shall review the proposed subdivision and provide comments and recommendations to the Planning Board for their consideration. Preparation of a Historic Resource Impact Study by the applicant may be required.*
- Where significant historic resources are present, require the applicant to prepare a Historic Resource Impact Study that (1) identifies the historic resources, (2) outlines their historical development and

significance, (3) discusses the proposed treatment of the historic resources, and (4) if negatively impacted, requires and proposes mitigation measures for negotiation with the Planning Board.

As a basic requirement, Webster's current **Design Standards** for subdivisions require that applicants explore all methods and means to maintain as much of the natural topography, drainage, and vegetation as possible so that disruption of these natural features and characteristics is kept to an absolute minimum. All natural features, such as trees, wooded areas, water courses, scenic points and **historic spots**, shall be preserved as much as possible. Other than the brief mention of "historic spots" noted above, no mention is made of historic resources or neighborhood character. The following addition is recommended.

- Under Section VI. *Design Standards*, add a section titled *Protection of Historic Resources. It is the policy of the Town that historic building and landscape features and historic landscape contexts shall be preserved, incorporated into proposed new development, and appropriately treated in accordance with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties.*

Scenic Roads

Beyond the historic mill villages and Webster Lake recreational development, much of the Town of Webster is tree covered and rural in character, and significant portions of the Town are conservation lands under the ownership of governmental or non-profit entities. Rural roads within these areas are not under threat nor do they appear to be associated with significant historic resources or landscapes, such as historic farms. They are, however, scenic in their relationship to the surrounding natural landscape.

Some protection of these scenic road corridors could be provided through enactment of a Scenic Road Bylaw as authorized by Chapter 40, Section 15C of the Massachusetts General Laws. Webster's Zoning Bylaw requires the identification of scenic roads in accordance with Chapter 40, but it does not appear that the Town has ever adopted the bylaw nor designated scenic roads within its boundaries.

A Scenic Road Bylaw allows a municipality to officially designate local roads as Scenic Roads. Once designated, any repair, maintenance, reconstruction, or paving work done shall not involve or include the cutting or removal of trees or the tearing down or destruction of stone walls without prior written consent of the Planning Board. Numbered routes and state highways are exempt unless the entire length of the route is contained within the municipality.

A Scenic Road Bylaw would provide a measure of recognition and consideration of the impacts to Webster's local scenic roads by development and other actions.

RECOMMENDATION 4T: Consider enactment of a Scenic Road Bylaw in Webster in accordance with MGL Chapter 40, Section 15C to provide review and protection for the scenic character of historic local roads. Priority three recommendation to be implemented by the Board of Selectmen and Planning Board.



CHAPTER 5

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The most important need for historic preservation in Webster going forward is the engagement of residents in appreciation of the Town's history and the resources that contribute to Webster's historic character. To this end, Chapter 4 of this plan recommends using Webster's Slater family history for branding and marketing for economic development. Chapter 3 recommends nomination of North Village and South Village to the National Register to help raise public awareness and implementation of an outreach program by the Historical Commission to help inform property owners about the appropriate treatment of historic properties.

Chapter 5 outlines a proposed **Townwide interpretive presentation** to enhance Webster as a destination and attraction for visitors while also raising public awareness of the Town's history and character. This presentation would feature the Samuel Slater Experience as a world class interpretive attraction for visitors and it would provide coordinated self-guided outdoor exhibits, installations, and public art in public places throughout the Town telling the Webster story in creative and engaging ways. Such a townwide presentation can be implemented in a phased manner over time as opportunities and funding are available.

HISTORY OF WEBSTER

To begin discussion of public engagement, however, this Historic Preservation Plan wishes to emphasize the need for additional in-depth historical research on Webster's history. The historic resource inventories for Webster addressed in Chapter 3 and Appendix E of this plan provide important background research on the Town's historical development and its historic resources. This history is summarized in Chapter 2. The proposed National Register nominations for North Village and South Village will provide additional historical information as will the inventory work proposed in Chapter 3.

But more is needed. Webster is in need of historical research undertaken by local historians knowledgeable about local history, resources, and places. Local historians have the time and ability to research topics in depth in ways that professional consultants cannot. This is not only because of their detailed knowledge of local topics, it is also because of their access to local information sources, such as newspaper articles, public records, photographs, and other archival information professional consultants do not have the time or ability to access.

In-depth local research is the job of Webster's local historical society, the Webster-Dudley Historical Society. This is not a job, however, that the Webster-Dudley Historical Society has been performing. The Historical Commission should work with the Webster-Dudley Historical Society on its mission and capacity to undertake the needed role of a historical society in Webster – collecting archival information and undertaking research. Out of this work, the Webster-Dudley Historical Society should be participating in (if not leading) public programming to residents and producing articles and books on Webster's history that can be sold to residents and visitors.

Revitalization of the Webster-Dudley Historical Society might begin with facilitated strategic planning on how the Historical Society can take steps to expand and strengthen its volunteer corps.

RECOMMENDATION 5A: Strengthen and revitalize the Webster-Dudley Historical Society to enable it to actively undertake research and programming. *Ongoing recommendation to be undertaken by the Webster-Dudley Historical Society with support from the Webster Historical Commission.*



The 1835 Little Red Schoolhouse, home of the Webster-Dudley Historical Society.

TOWNWIDE INTERPRETIVE PRESENTATION

Webster has the benefit of having a nationally significant history that is preserved and embodied in its neighborhoods and historic resources. Webster's historic character is the key to its economic revitalization, which in turn is the foundation for its future quality of life.

Local residents do not appear to fully appreciate the significance of Webster's history or the importance of the historic buildings and resources that are a product of that history. This chapter proposes a Townwide interpretive presentation that can be organized and implemented over time to strengthen Webster's identity, raise public awareness about that identity, and use that identity for economic revitalization. Chapter 5 is about presentation of Webster's stories, helping residents and visitors understand how Webster developed, why it is the way it is, and why it is significant.

A Townwide interpretive presentation phased in over time would help establish Webster as a destination and attraction.

Webster is an attraction to which visitors can be drawn, with economic benefits to local businesses and services and to the owners of historic properties. The proposed interpretive presentation gives visitors something to see and do when they are here, an added reason to come.

The core idea is to install creative, self-guided, outdoor interpretive exhibits and installations in public places throughout Webster telling the Town's stories using historic buildings, features, and places in the storytelling. Downtown Webster, the Mill District, and historic mill village neighborhoods are places where the presentation should be featured.

The presentation should be coordinated site to site. It should be implemented over time as opportunities are presented, building on outdoor exhibits the Town has already installed. It should feature the world class Samuel Slater Experience as its key attraction. It should use best practices for interpretation and engagement.

RECOMMENDATION 5B: Undertake phased implementation of a Townwide interpretive presentation as an economic revitalization strategy to strengthen identity, raise public awareness for residents, and help position Webster as a destination and attraction for visitors. *Phased recommendation to be led by the Board of Selectmen in partnership with Webster's economic stakeholders.*

Samuel Slater Experience

The Samuel Slater Experience is a world class attraction interpreting Samuel Slater and his establishment of Webster through experiential learning. Since its opening in March 2022, the Samuel Slater Experience has increasingly become a destination for history buffs from around the region. The museum has also become a part of the education of children from many surrounding communities. In the spring of 2024, more than 1,250 students came through on school field trips.

Samuel Slater Experience is not a traditional museum, with visitors simply looking at artifacts and static displays. Rather, the Samuel Slater story is told with high-tech media: video, audio, motion, wind, and scents, to create an immersive experience. It covers two time periods of Webster history: the early

1800s and the early 1900s — bookends of the Slater family mills in Webster. In those time periods, it covers themes such as technological innovation, the economics of mill communities, child labor, and immigration. Visitors to the museum often ask where and how they can see the historical sites that are referenced in the exhibits.

The Samuel Slater Experience's creativity and vibrancy can be the hallmark of Webster's Townwide interpretive presentation.

The Samuel Slater Experience is a key attraction for Webster that should be promoted as part of the Town's economic and marketing strategy to attract visitors to the Town. The Experience should be connected to Downtown Webster through wayfinding and the Townwide interpretive presentation proposed here. The Townwide interpretive presentation is an effort to spread the Samuel Slater Experience to Webster's authentic historic places. While the museum's immersive experience cannot be replicated outdoors, its creativity and vibrancy can be embraced and be a hallmark of the Town's presentation.

RECOMMENDATION 5C: Actively support and promote the Samuel Slater Experience as a key attraction in Webster and the hub of its Townwide interpretive presentation. *Ongoing recommendation to be led by the Board of Selectmen in partnership with Webster's economic stakeholders.*

The Samuel Slater Experience is now deep into a project that will promote their ability to attract more private events and to host community events, both with a goal to improve long-term sustainability. The lot in back of the building will be redone with a dedicated space for parking and a large grassy area and pavilion.

This exterior site project will allow them to rent space to people who would like to have an indoor and outdoor space for their event, such as a wedding, birthday party, company reception, or organization meeting. The new outdoor area can host events for the community, such as art exhibits, craft shows, farmers' markets, historical reenactments, and small concerts.

Given that the Town owns the two playing fields on either side of the site, they will also have the potential of co-hosting larger events with approval of the Town. Such events could be coordinated with Downtown or Townwide events at multiple locations as discussed at the end of this chapter.



Samuel Slater Experience is located in a former National Guard Amory on Ray Street owned by the Town.

Branding and Wayfinding

Chapter 4 recommends that Webster use its Slater mill history as its identity and brand for marketing and economic revitalization. Identity and branding are key marketing tools central to the Webster's economic development strategy of making Downtown a regional hub of public activity and promoting its historic neighborhoods to regional audiences as desirable places to live and invest. Webster's Slater history is unique in New England and American history. This branding will unite the Town with one of its principal visitor attractions.

Chapter 4 also suggests that a wayfinding system be developed using its Slater graphic identity to assist visitors in finding Downtown and other locations. The intersection with I-395 is the principal entry point. The Samuel Slater Experience may be the most important location for visitors other than Downtown—the museum is not easy to find for those not familiar with the Town. Wayfinding will help connect Samuel Slater Experience to Downtown visually and physically.

Interpretive Planning and Design

Implementation of a Townwide interpretive presentation can be undertaken on an ad hoc basis as opportunities arise, but it would be preferable to have a conceptual interpretive plan in place for guidance. An ad hoc approach would add new interpretive exhibits and public art as new projects are undertaken, determining on a case-by-case basis the interpretive content and design of each exhibit.

The interpretive exhibits that have already been implemented in French River Park and their related facilities are of high quality and are a good example of what can be done. The murals along Main Street are good examples as well. Both contribute to the start of a Townwide presentation. An ad hoc approach will continue to enhance the Downtown experience and can be built out over time and expanded to other places.

Preferably, however, it is recommended that Webster engage professional consultants to prepare a Community Interpretive Plan to identify places where interpretation may be offered, provide conceptual designs for those places, and organize coordinated storytelling between sites of such quality that it can be marketed to the public as a destination and attraction. Webster's Townwide interpretive presentation can be envisioned as an extension of the Samuel Slater Experience, linking authentic sites throughout the Town with high quality interpretive exhibits.

In general, a **Community Interpretive Plan** should provide a blueprint of how best to present an overview of Webster's history, character, and identity to which visitors and residents can relate. The interpretive plan should:

- Identify the **local partners** who will be involved in developing and implementing the interpretive presentation;
- Convey a **statement of purpose** outlining Webster's historical significance and the significance of its resources, and outlining the goals, guidelines, and expected visitor experience for the interpretive presentation;

- Provide a brief overview of **existing interpretation, programming, and visitor services** in Webster which the presentation can incorporate and support;
- Identify the interpretive **themes and storylines** which Webster's history and resources should convey;
- Identify the **historic resources and places** that can be featured in the storytelling, the stories with which they are associated, and the locations where exhibits may be sited;
- Identify the **exhibit types**, public art or other media that may be used in the presentation;
- Organize a design and implementation process to assure **quality control**; and
- Prioritize a program of **phased implementation** that can be used for funding purposes.

RECOMMENDATION 5D: Prepare a Community Interpretive Plan for conceptual design of a Townwide interpretive presentation of the Slater mill town story of sufficient quality that it can be marketed to visitors. Priority two recommendation to be led by the Board of Selectmen in partnership with Webster's economic stakeholders, Samuel Slater Experience, Historical Commission, Historical Society, and others as appropriate.

It is suggested that the Community Interpretive Plan be prepared under the authority of the Board of Selectmen and led by an Interpretive Committee created for that purpose. The **Interpretive Committee** should include community partners and stakeholders in the endeavor and should also include persons experienced in public history and interpretation.

A professional consulting team should be retained to prepare the plan, reporting to the Interpretive Committee. The professional consulting team should be experienced in museum quality interpretation, exhibit design, and landscape design. If possible, the professional consulting team should be retained for implementation on a project-by-project basis.

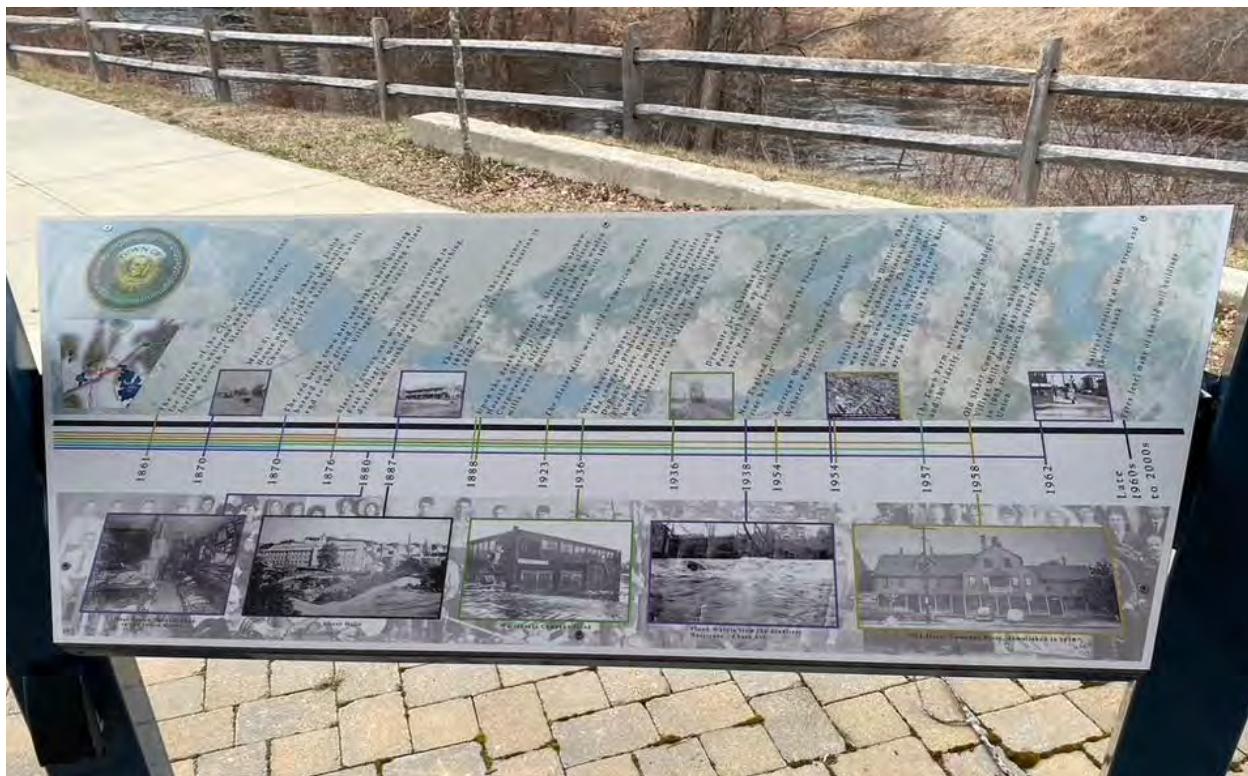


Existing interpretive exhibits in French River Park, fishing spot on the left with natural resource interpretation and exhibit pavilion on the right.

Desired Visitor Experience

Webster's visitor and interpretive experience should be designed to connect people to the Town's places and resources so they recognize Webster's distinctive history and identity and appreciate Webster as a desirable place to visit and to live. Upon experiencing the Townwide interpretive presentation, residents and visitors will:

- Appreciate Webster's **distinctive history** and associated places and resources;
- Appreciate Webster's **character** and **quality of life** as a place to visit and to live;
- Be stimulated to **explore Webster** and return to favorite places for enjoyable, valued, and enriching experiences;
- Appreciate how Webster's history is related to the evolving regional and **national stories**;
- Connect local historic buildings, landscapes, and resources with Webster's broader **themes and storylines**;
- Gain a **shared identity** and sense of value that is tied to Webster's history and character among residents;
- Be supportive of public and private **stewardship** initiatives in historic preservation, land conservation, and community enhancement;
- Engage in a **vision for the future** that embraces community priorities and supports sustainability and best practices in growth and change.



One of two interpretive panels in the exhibit pavilion in French River Park. Timelines with maps and historic photos — nicely done.

Audiences

In planning for a Townwide interpretive presentation, it is necessary to be aware of who the intended audiences are, their interests and capabilities, and how interpretive programming will reach them. This begins with understanding the plan's goals for interpretation and visitor experience as noted above.

The Townwide interpretive presentation has two broad sets of audiences: residents and visitors. The purpose in reaching out to **residents** is to strengthen community awareness, engagement, identity, and placemaking and, as a result, build strong neighborhoods and promote Webster as a desirable place to live. Homeowners and landlords will take better care of their historic properties, and property values will rise.

Local residents include both those living in the historic mill villages and those living around Webster Lake. They are both expected to support lakeside and Downtown restaurants, shops, and services, strengthening the local economy.

The purpose in reaching out to **visitors** is to strengthen Webster economically by establishing the Town as a regional heritage tourism destination, using historic character and interpretive programming to attract visitors from across the region who will travel here to patronize local restaurants, shops, and services. High quality interpretation will strengthen historic community character, helping to turn Webster into a destination that can be marketed.

Different audiences have different needs and expectations. The interpretive and visitor experiences planned Townwide and at each specific site must be capable of meeting the needs and expectations of the different types of audiences who are being engaged. Interpretive planning prepared for individual communities and sites needs to specifically plan for the audiences they expect to serve.

Heritage travelers are the common regional visitor group to which historic communities and many historic sites appeal. Heritage travelers are older, affluent, and well-educated. They tend to travel by automobile in small groups: as couples, pairs of couples, or small groups of family and friends. They do not usually travel with children.

Heritage travelers are interested in and engaged with the places they visit. They are looking for a high-quality experience. They are capable of absorbing detailed interpretive information, and they are interested in understanding the broader implications of the information presented. They are interested in a broad range of subjects, including agricultural, economic, social, ecological, and cultural themes.

Authenticity is a key attraction to heritage travelers. They want to see, experience, and appreciate the actual places where things happened. Quality of life is of particular interest. Heritage travelers are interested in a holistic experience, not just visiting attractions. They want to be in interesting places, and they want to experience the places that local residents frequent.

Heritage travelers are interested in the quality of the overall experience: the driving, the scenery, the lodging, dining, and shopping. Potential destinations must be safe and of sufficient quality. Heritage travelers are willing to spend

more money than other types of audiences. They tend to be repeat visitors if they like the place and feel there is more to see and do. They are also likely to explore from one site to another.

Families are a primary audience for many visitor attractions. Families are as likely to be local residents as they are to be visitors. Local families are an important constituency and should make up a significant proportion of the visitation to heritage attractions. Families are among the most important type of resident groups.

Families tend to have limited time periods for their visits. They require visitor services, such as rest rooms, places for older people to rest, friendly and respectful guides, and snacks, if possible. Families are looking for fun in a safe environment. They are more interested in the experience than in the subject matter. They need quick, easy learning. Learning should be visual and experiential, not text based. Only the high points and the basics need be presented. They are more likely to be interested in cultural themes and in people's lives and experiences rather than in abstract information.

Historic communities and interpretive sites provide places where residents can take **visiting guests, friends, and family** to have a nice time and to learn about the area. When friends or family come to visit, local residents look for something interesting to do with them. They want to show their guests where they live, take them to the best places to visit, and put the community's best foot forward. The Samuel Slater Experience as well as high quality outdoor interpretive sites help fill this need in providing something interesting to do with guests. The friends of families are therefore an important extension of the resident base visitation for a site as well as for a community.

Student groups make up a large proportion of the yearly visitation to the Samuel Slater Experience, though they are less likely to be important for Webster's outdoor interpretive presentation. Attracting student groups takes significant planning and effort. Visitation by student groups is regional in nature. Only school districts or home-schooled pupils within a reasonable driving distance will be able to visit a particular site, as the entire trip must fit within the time limitations of the school day.

The Samuel Slater Experience is already experienced in planning for student groups. The range and quality of programming that it provides is impressive. Engaging programming is the key; the Samuel Slater Experience's immersive experience is engaging and real. It is not only interesting and fun for students, it also make the work of the teacher easier and more successful. Student programs are planned in accordance with curriculum guidelines and the interests of teachers, students, parents, curriculum planners, and administrators. Meeting the educational needs of specific courses and subject matter is important.

Webster's overall Townwide interpretive presentation should support the Samuel Slater Experience's student programming.

Outdoor Exhibits

A centerpiece of the Townwide interpretive presentation would be a set of Outdoor Exhibits used for self-guided interpretive experiences at historic sites, on streetscapes, within parks and other public open spaces, and along trails. The Outdoor Exhibits will enable publicly accessible sites to tell their stories without the need for staffing or for indoor museum programming. Self-guided sites can be made visitor ready with great flexibility and minimal cost such that they can be marketed to visitors alongside larger attractions, such as the Samuel Slater Experience and any others that might be developed.

Self-guided outdoor exhibits would be the centerpiece of the Townwide interpretive presentation.

Implementation of the Outdoor Exhibits should be managed by the Interpretive Committee mentioned above in association with other stakeholders. Interpretive content, design, and implementation would be prepared by the retained professional consulting team. Professional interpreters should provide guidance and quality control in accordance with a defined design and implementation process.

Installation of the Outdoor Exhibits at identified sites should coordinate interpretation specific to the site with Webster's Townwide themes and storylines. Once installed and visitor-ready, sites or groups of sites may be marketed along with other attractions as part of the Townwide presentation.

Webster's Outdoor Exhibits should use a common graphic format based on the Town's graphic identity. High-quality customized exhibits, kiosks, and installations like the existing exhibits at French River Park are encouraged. It is possible, however, that standard National Park Service exhibit carriers could be used to simplify the design process and reduce costs.

The exhibit program should also consider the use of digital content that can be accessed using smartphones, tablets, and online. Digital content should be rich in its visual presentation and has the advantage of being able to be easily and frequently updated.

Implementation of the Outdoor Exhibits requires coordination and planning and may be undertaken in a manner that is flexible and easily executed. Exhibits should be readily perceived as a coordinated Townwide presentation linking a number of small scale self-guided interpretive sites. It is important that the program have a consistently high level of quality, content, and visual appeal. To that end, a simple process should be established to guide implementation in the preparation, installation, and maintenance of the interpretive exhibits. Selected sites must be publicly accessible seven days a week, year-round.

RECOMMENDATION 5E: Use Outdoor Exhibits at sites throughout historic Webster in realizing a Townwide interpretive presentation. Priority two recommendation to be led by an Interpretive Committee under the direction of the Board of Selectmen.



National Park Service exhibit carriers are widely recognized by the general public for their appearance and professionalism, and they are available in a variety of sizes and formats.



Customized exhibit carriers convey a sense of design quality and are preferred for presentations wishing to make a strong impression. (Photos: left, Cloud Gehshan; right, C&G Partners)

Implementation of Outdoor Exhibits may be phased in over time in accordance with the availability of funding. Prioritization should be given to interpretive sites that are visitor ready, well organized, and may be coordinated, linked, and marketed as a network with other sites thematically or physically. Over time, a wide range of sites may be included presenting various themes and storylines.

Public Art

Public art is an important medium through which public places may be enhanced and interpretation may be offered. Webster has used public art to enhance its Downtown historic district and French River Park.

Historically, monuments, statues, plaques, historic objects, and similar forms of public art have been used as a means of commemorating places and events. Where they are present, such traditional works of art should be recognized and preserved and perhaps supplemented with additional interpretation. Veteran's Park adjacent to Webster Town Hall is a prime example and may be featured and further interpreted and enhanced as part of the Townwide presentation.

Many communities use public art such as sculpture, murals, and other creative installations to enhance streetscapes, plazas, parks, buildings, sidewalks, and trails, enlivening the landscape and visually interpreting community stories. The large mural in Downtown Webster at the intersection of Davis Street and Main Street is an excellent example of public art used as a landmark and placemaker to establish community identity.



The mural on the Davis Street side of a Downtown commercial building draws attention to the access road to French River Park, the Riverwalk, and public parking area behind the Downtown commercial buildings.

The use of public art as an interpretive medium to tell local stories and enhance the character of historic places is encouraged and is a means of addressing experiential learning. Public art may be integrated into the interpretive presentation at any historic site and should be featured in the development of the Townwide interpretive presentation.

RECOMMENDATION 5F: Use Public Art at appropriate sites throughout historic Webster in realizing a Townwide interpretive presentation. Priority two recommendation to be led by an Interpretive Committee under the direction of the Board of Selectmen.

Funding may be sought expressly for outdoor art installations presenting local interpretive themes and stories. Local artists may be engaged to create art installations for communities on a case-by-case basis. Regional arts and cultural organizations may be included in collaborative efforts to interpret communities and sites.

The process for using public art as an interpretive medium should be similar to that used for Outdoor Exhibits. Sites appropriate to the use of public art should be identified along with the themes and stories to be related. Proposed art installations should be sympathetic to the character of the landscape in which they are placed and should work in conjunction with other forms of interpretation being used.

Conceptual designs should be developed for art installations and refined as appropriate. Accurate cost estimates should be prepared by qualified fabricators, with whom consultations may be undertaken to find the most cost-effective materials and means of fabrication. Installation may be coordinated with other desired site improvements.



Mural in Downtown Webster (left); restored historic sign painted on the side of a commercial building on the south side of Main Street – a form of public art (right).



Slater's Sheep Community Art Project – one of many sheep sculptures painted by artists and located at sites throughout Webster to support opening of the Samuel Slater Experience in 2022.

Landscape Installations as Placemakers

Placemakers are objects or installations used to enhance a site and convey information visually without words. A form of public art, such installations visually and immediately communicate with visitors; no words are necessary.

Public art and landscape installations convey quality and add an element of experiential learning to outdoor interpretation.

Landscape installations are particularly appropriate as placemakers within a historic landscape context or natural area. Some nature preserves prefer art installations over signage for interpretation because they are more in keeping with the experiential appeal of the natural landscape and because of the high-quality experience they communicate to visitors.

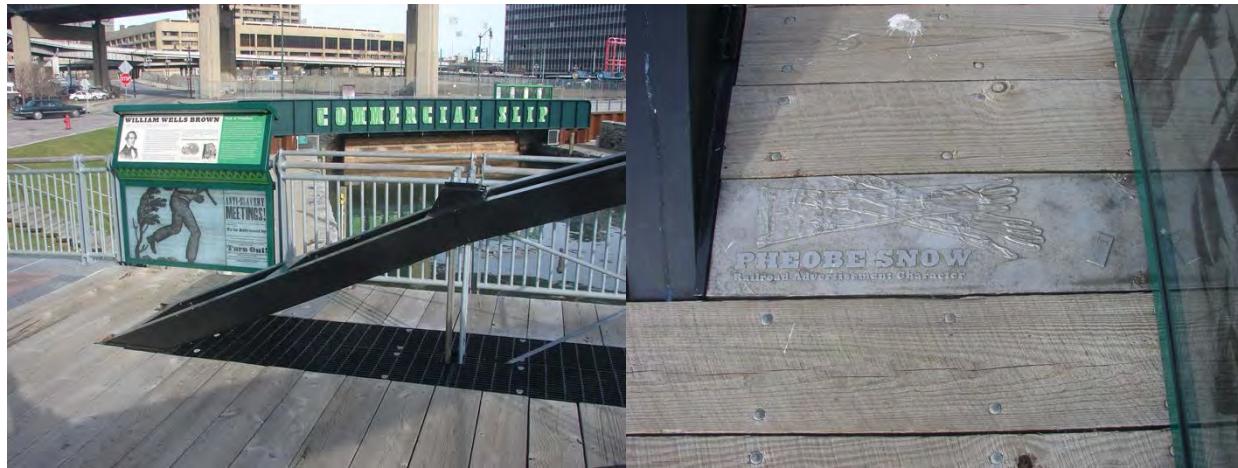
Within a historic context, landscape installations can combine with artifacts and remnant site features to interpret an area in a striking manner and with great appeal. Webster's mill district is a particularly appropriate place for use of landscape installations.

Creative landscape installations may be used as a form of public art to interpret important sites where a substantive interpretive presentation is desired on a large scale and where a self-guided experience is necessary. Landscape installations may employ structures, objects, sculpture, night lighting, vegetation, and other means and can be used to create an engaging, impactful, and high-quality interpretive presence with minimal signage.

Landscape installations should be incorporated into the Townwide interpretive presentation in as robust a way as possible and could be a signature feature of Webster's interpretive experience.



The inlaid granite paver on Webster's Riverwalk is a creative means of providing interpretation to visitors.



Erie Canal Harbor in Buffalo, NY is the site where the Erie Canal connected to Lake Erie. Filled and paved over as a parking lot, the City of Buffalo transformed the site into a waterfront interpretive park. Historic building foundations were uncovered and preserved, the end portion of the canal was reconstructed, an historic bridge was recreated, a museum was built, and interpretive exhibits were placed throughout. The project is a demonstration of the use of different types of creative landscape installations. A similar approach could be taken in the long-term redevelopment of Webster's mill district. (Photos: C&G Partners)



Creative landscape exhibits and installations at the West Point Foundry Preserve in Cold Spring, NY. The historic foundry is an archeological site with ruins and site features but no buildings. Creative and high-quality landscape installations were used to convey the nature, scale, and use of the historic structures that had been located there. (Photos: C&G Partners)

Guiding Principles

The following principles may be used to help guide interpretation and visitor experience for Webster's Townwide interpretive presentation. Webster has a distinctive history and character. Its interpretation is about illuminating that history and character and drawing meaningful personal connections. The guiding principles outlined below represent best practices in the design of interpretative experiences.

Experience of Place: Use the historic and natural landscape as the vehicle through which stories are told, relating stories to real places and tangible features and evoking a sense of place. Use authentic physical features – buildings, streetscapes, site features, landforms, waterways, plant communities, and other resources – to tell the stories.

Significance and Meaning: Interpretation goes beyond conveying a story's facts. Good Interpretation draws connections, significance, and meaning to audiences. In developing interpretive content, examine each subject or story for its significance, for a key message to be conveyed by the story or exhibit. Communicate this significance or message to audiences in ways that connect to their life experiences.

Shared Human Experience: Provide interpretation in ways that help audiences relate it to experiences in their own lives. Using the authentic stories of real people in their words in the actual places where events occurred is encouraged wherever possible. The expression of universal concepts such as love, loss, uncertainty, and success to which everyone can relate in their lives helps forge personal connections to a story.

Points of View: Present stories from multiple perspectives in their thematic and historic context to help audiences appreciate how different people from diverse cultures see things and communicate differently. Encourage audiences to draw their own conclusions from each story.

Acknowledge the Unpleasant: Cultural stories are not always pleasant or uplifting. Difficulty and conflict are represented both in the challenges of life and in the interactions of diverse groups of peoples. These difficulties and conflicts should be accurately represented in the storytelling.

Context: While individual stories may be unique, they should all connect to the Townwide themes. Stories should illustrate the themes and connect to the bigger picture in ways that make them immediate and understandable.

Connections: Where applicable, connect the stories of specific sites to the stories at other sites as part of the communication of context, significance, and meaning. Encourage visitors to visit other sites within the Town's presentation to learn about other aspects of the related themes and stories.

Accuracy: Stories and content must be well researched and accurate. If the stories are based upon legend, lore, or oral tradition, clearly state so.

Quality: Every interpretive installation and experience should meet the highest standards of quality in terms of location, design, orientation to resource, storytelling, physical installation, accessibility, and visitor

experience. Guidelines, review processes, and technical assistance will be needed to help maintain quality standards. The Townwide presentation cannot be marketed to visitors unless it is of high quality.

Experiential Learning: People learn and remember things better when they physically do them. Emphasize communication that is visual and tied to real things and authentic places and features over the reading of waysides and text. Physical activities provide visitors with various sensory experiences—the sights, the distances, the sense of landscape and landforms associated with places and events. The Samuel Slater Experience is an excellent example of experiential learning. While more difficult in an outdoor presentation, experiential learning should be the goal.

Variety of Experiences: Provide a variety of interpretive approaches to satisfy the interests and capabilities of different age groups, temperaments, and orientations. Options should offer varying levels of activity, timeframes, and levels of required concentration. Provide alternative ways to experience interpretation for individuals with physical limitations or disabilities. Make use of cutting edge technology where useful and appropriate.

Opportunities to Explore: Present themes and stories in ways that encourage audiences to explore other places and sites. Draw interpretive connections, insert tempting leads, and provide the information and tools needed to spark and follow through on their interests. Encourage audiences to explore the landscape physically by inviting them to move around from place to place.

Depth of Information: Primary interpretive content should be succinct and well written, emphasizing key messages, context, and connections. In addition, develop information and guidance for exploring subjects in greater detail to encourage those who are interested to explore subjects to whatever level of detail they wish.



The Slater family grave site at Mt. Zion Cemetery is an important potential interpretive site. Many other historic Webster residents could be interpreted there as well.

COMMUNITY PROGRAMMING AND EVENTS

Webster can offer programming and events to residents and visitors as part of its Downtown revitalization initiative and Townwide interpretive presentation. Many **Main Street** communities offer a set of annual programming and events over the spring, summer, and fall seasons to attract and engage visitors, support local businesses, provide educational and cultural experiences, and showcase the sites where they are held. Webster should build up a set of community events as part of a Main Street initiative as discussed in Chapter 4.

Programming and events can be part of the Townwide interpretive presentation as well, holding the events in historic locations where interpretation is offered and organizing living history and other types of presentations as features of an event.

RECOMMENDATION 5G: Develop a set of annual community events to attract visitors and residents, support local businesses, and showcase Webster's Townwide interpretive presentation. *Priority two recommendation to be led by Webster's economic development stakeholders under the direction of the Board of Selectmen.*

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the **Samuel Slater Experience** is deep into a project that will enable it to offer outdoor events adjacent to its museum both as a community attraction and a source of funding. An area on the 2 ½ acre site in back of the museum building is to be improved with a dedicated space for parking, a large grassy area for gathering, and a pavilion for shelter.

The new outdoor area will be able to host events for the community, such as art exhibits, craft shows, farmers' markets, living history demonstrations, and small concerts. It will also allow the museum to rent space to people who would like to have an indoor and outdoor space for their event, such as a wedding, birthday party, company reception, or organization meeting. The ability to host private events as a source of revenue will help the museum improve long-term sustainability.

Community events at the museum can be coordinated with events being held Downtown, at Indian Ranch, Memorial Beach, or within the mill district. Outdoor exhibits and landscape installations may be installed as part of the Townwide interpretive presentation, building on the world class interpretive experience offered indoors. The Town-owned playing fields on either side of the Samuel Slater Experience offer the possibility for co-hosting larger community events.

As the Town of Webster expands on the goal of highlighting its history and becoming a destination for visitors from around the region, it is exploring how to convert the historic auditorium in Town Hall into a performing arts theater. Currently in the early planning stages, the historic 1,200-seat auditorium could become a major regional venue, the **Samuel Slater Theater for the Performing Arts**. The new theater would be able to host community events such as plays and musicals and Town activities such as community meetings and voting. With

A set of annual community events can be offered connecting various sites including Downtown and the Samuel Slater Experience.

its centralized location, the Samuel Slater Theater would be a cultural focal point in the Downtown area and contribute to an increasing level of activity.

RECOMMENDATION 5H: Collaborate with the Samuel Slater Experience and other partners in the development of outdoor event spaces and a performing arts theater to enhance Webster as a visitor destination. Priority two recommendation to be led by Webster's economic development stakeholders under the direction of the Board of Selectmen.

WEBSITE AND ORIENTATION

Webster's economic revitalization initiative and Townwide interpretive presentation should have a comprehensive website to attract and orient visitors. It should also be an engaging vehicle for online interpretation.

Webster's interpretive presentation can be coordinated and promoted through a website offered to visitors.

The proposed website should present information on background, history, visitor sites, community events, and educational resources. The website should use the Town's Slater graphic identity and branding discussed in Chapter 4 and should be a full-service site for virtual visitors. It should be the foundation for a state-of-the-art online media experience, serve as a portal to and from other media formats, and be a launching point for features, services, and utilities that may be developed.

The proposed website may be a stand-alone creation but should be a featured link for heritage tourism from the websites of the Town, Samuel Slater Experience, Webster-Dudley Business Alliance, Webster-Dudley Historical Society, and others.

The website should orient potential visitors in their visit to Webster, offering information on places to go and things to see, including Webster Lake. It should include educational and interpretive content that is engaging and fun to explore—filled with photographs, maps, videos, and varying depths of information. Content should establish context, elaborate upon interpretive themes; provide substantive background and context for various storylines; and relate storylines to sites, experiences, walking and touring routes, and places to visit. A family of maps, brochures, and publications that can be downloaded or displayed should be created based on Webster's interpretive themes and storylines. The website should feature a community calendar to inform residents and visitors.

RECOMMENDATION 5I: Create a promotional website with visitor information and educational and interpretive content to engage, attract, and orient visitors. Priority two recommendation to be led by Webster's economic development stakeholders under the direction of the Board of Selectmen.

HERITAGE *strategies*