



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.

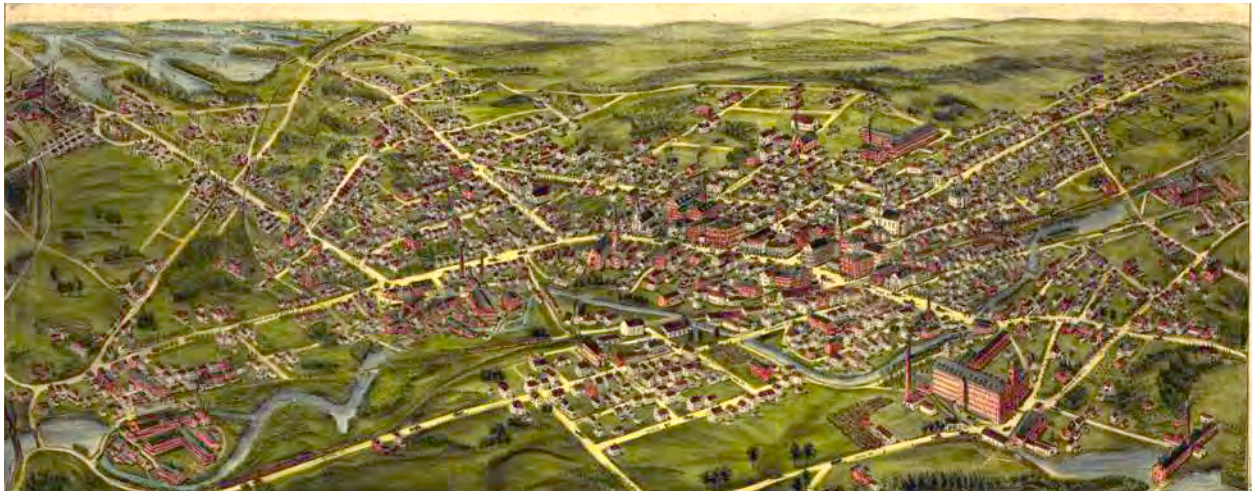
Webster's identity and significance is unique among New England's historic mill towns because of its association with Samuel Slater, known as the "Father of the American Industrial Revolution," and his family. It was in Webster that Slater focused his endeavors, establishing the first of several cotton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