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

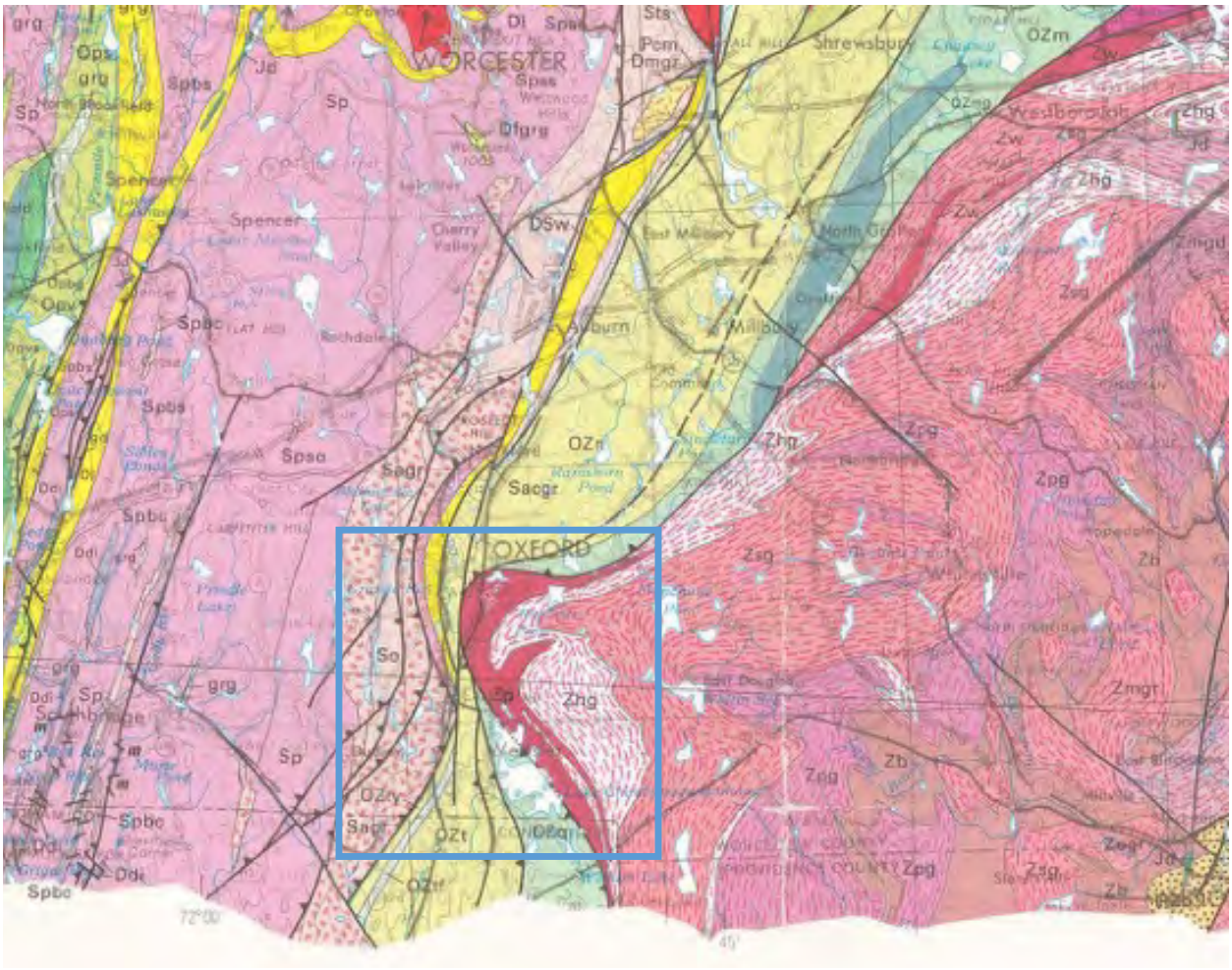
Webster is located in the central uplands portion of Massachusetts known as the Worcester Plateau, which separates the coastal lowlands to the east from the Connecticut River Valley to the west. Characterized by rugged terrain and deeply dissected by numerous watercourses, the region is classified as 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 ib 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 Hugenots 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.

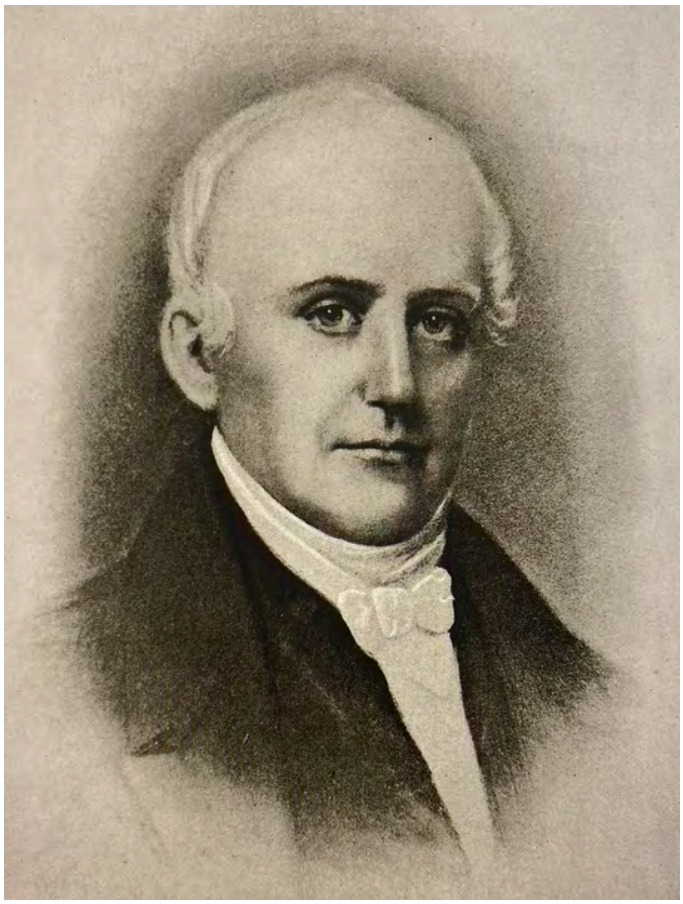
A second group of industrial buildings were constructed at the head of Webster Lake in what later became East Village. About 1798, Phili Brown and John Healy purchased part of the Asa Robinson farm at the head of the lake, including a saw and grist mill. They opened a water-operated foundry on the site, 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

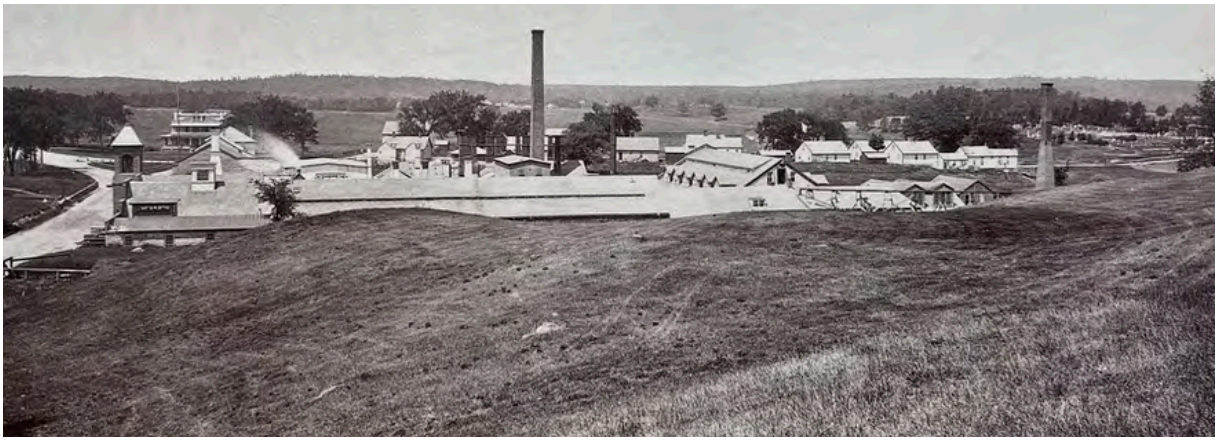
work his operations. Housing was constructed adjacent to the mill along existing roads. While men worked in the mill, women wove the mill-spun yarn into cloth at home.

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.

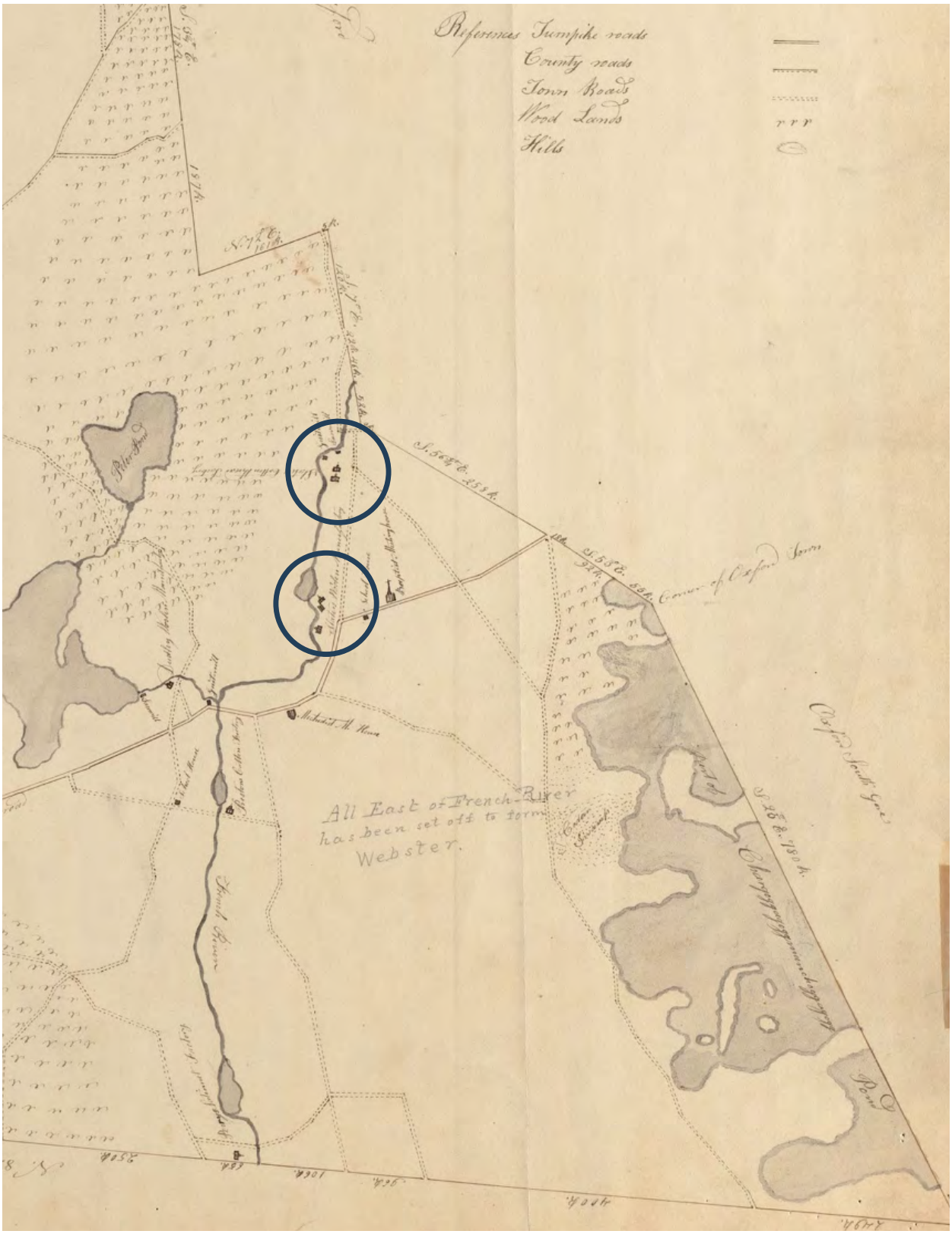
The small woolen mill in East Village burned in 1820, and Slater & Howard purchased a water privilege on the French River in what would become South Village. There, they constructed a larger woolen mill in 1821/22. Slater and Howard purchased acres of land in the vicinity and constructed a dam, canal, 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 Slaters 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.

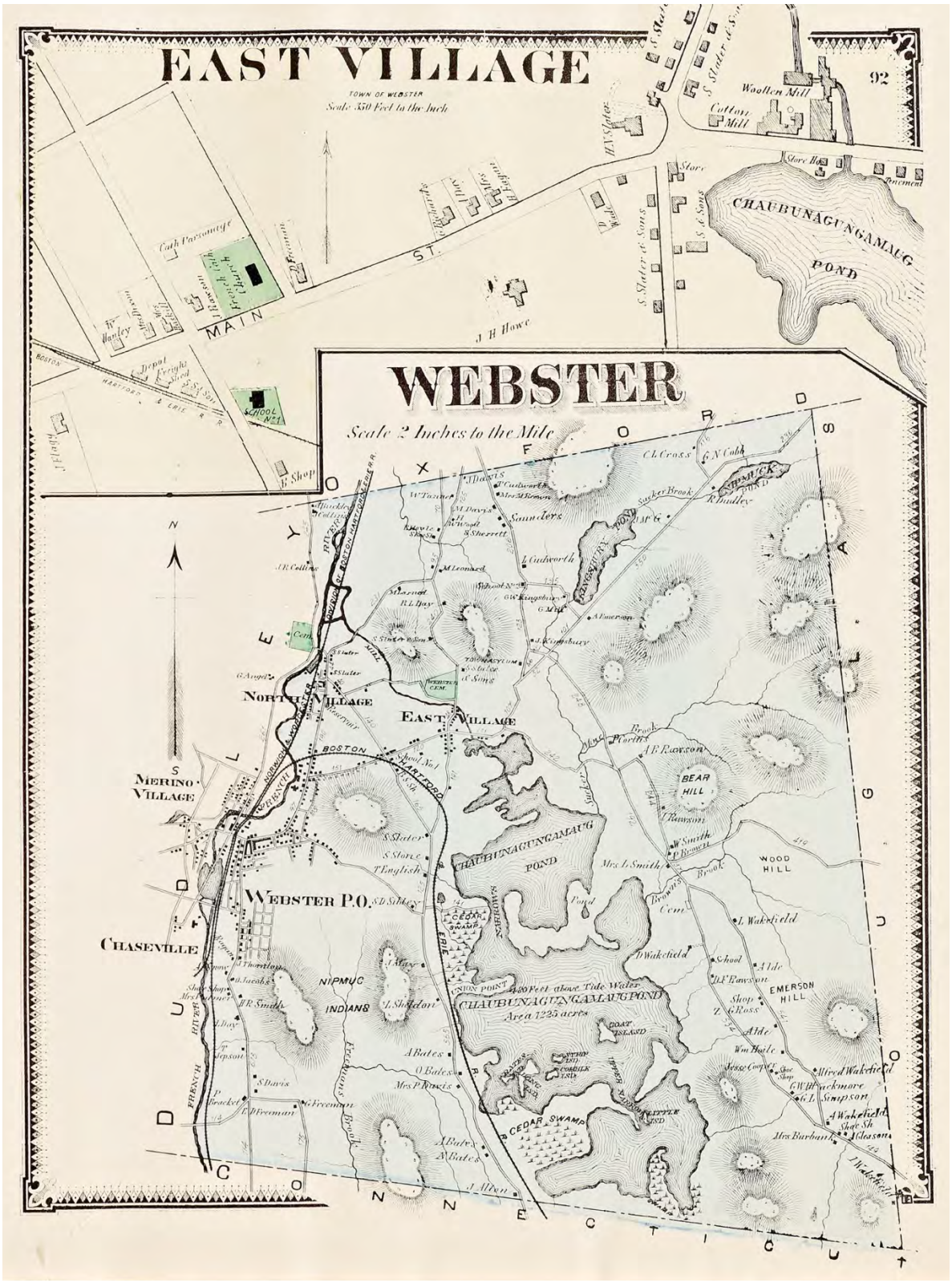
The three mill villages expanded, but remained separate concentrations amid the broader rural landscape, as depicted in the Town's 1870 maps. A new center emerged at the railroad's intersection with Main Street, which became known as Depot Village and eventually grew into Downtown Webster.

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.

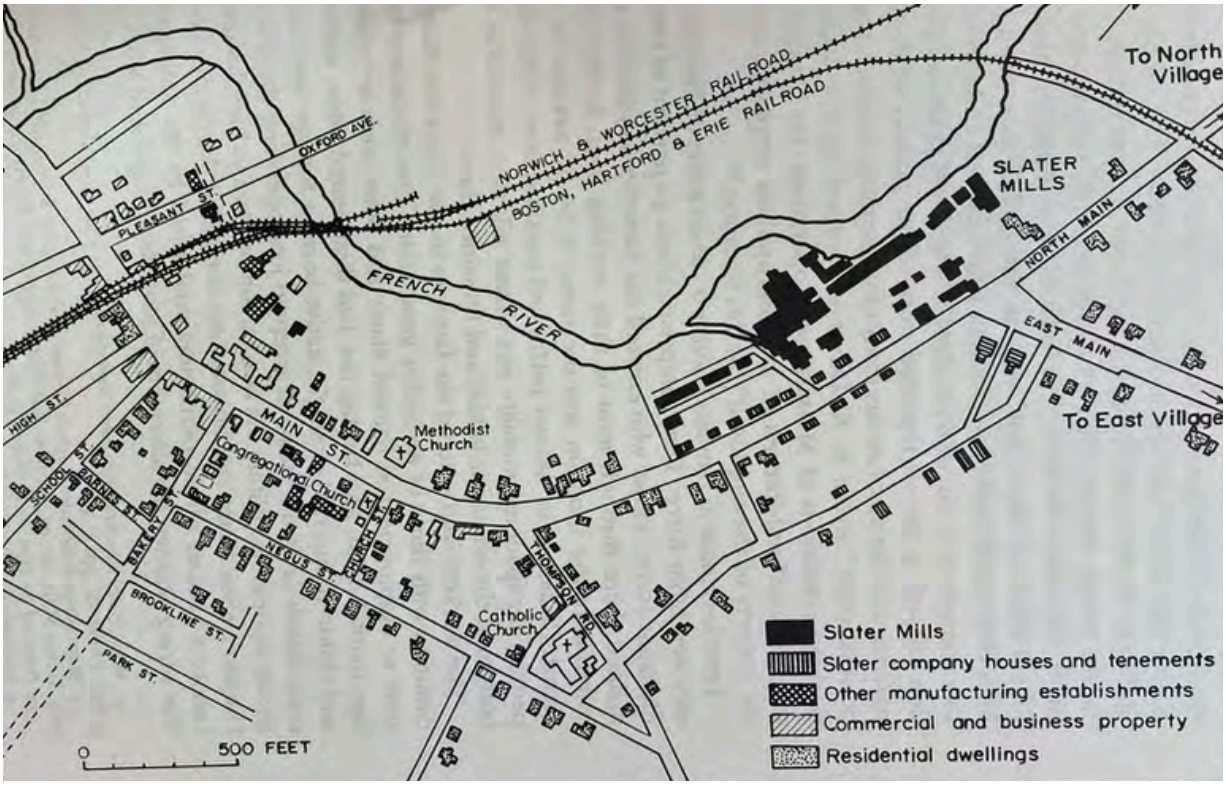
This growth can most clearly be seen in North Village, where most of the mid-to-late 19th century housing survives. These resources, though somewhat altered, are a superb record of Webster's built environment during this period. Much of the housing built during this period in South Village, and most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

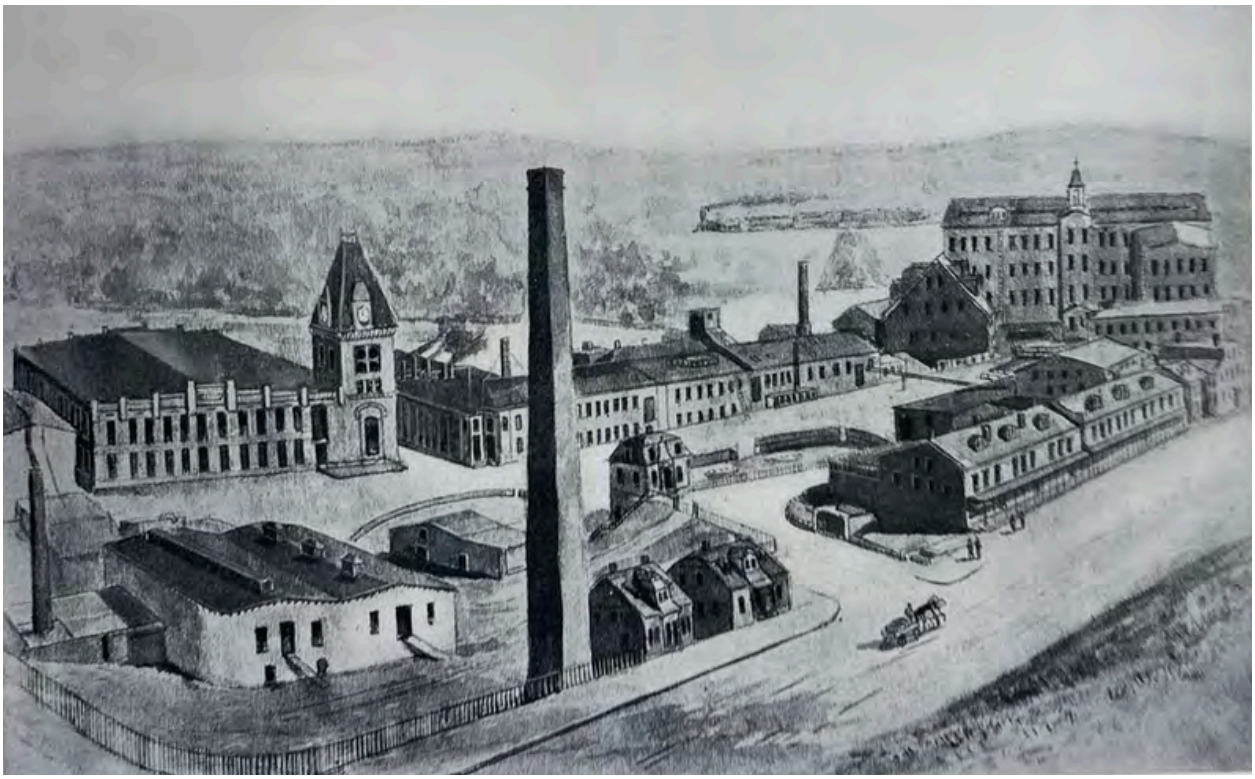


Beers Atlas of 1870 showing the limited extent of development in Webster and a detailed plan of East Village.

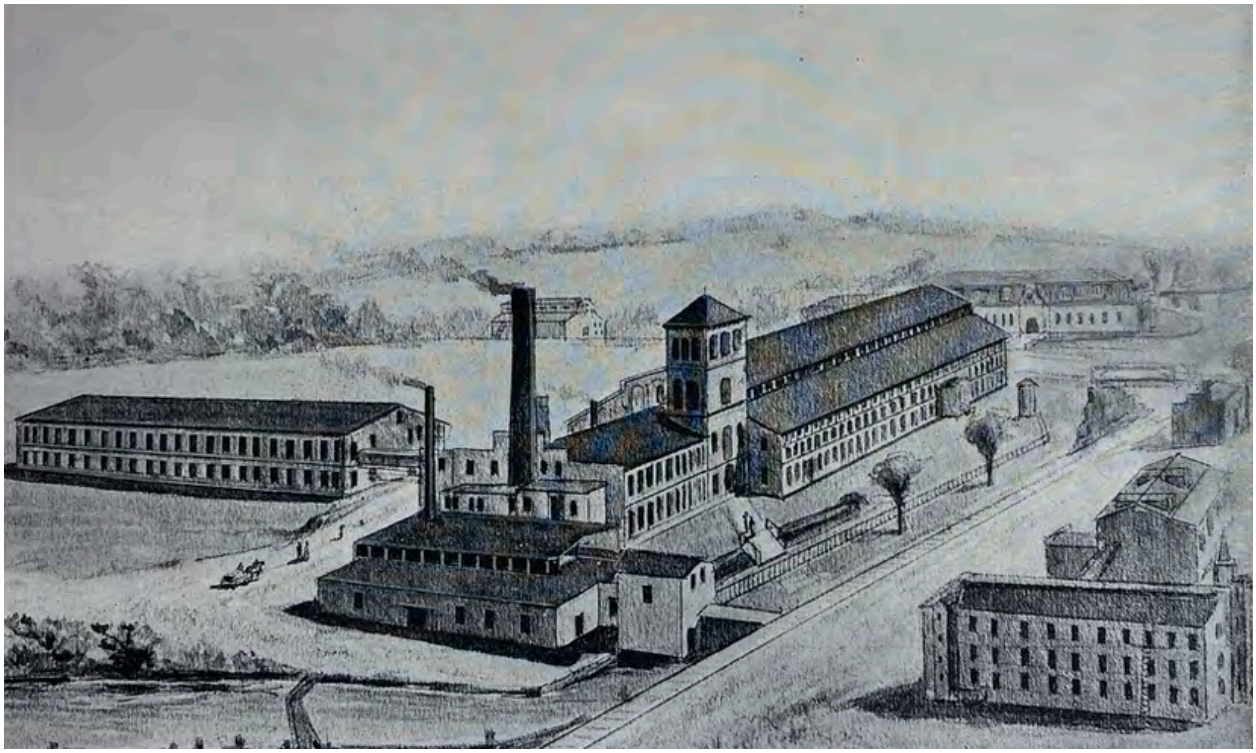
Beers Atlas of 1870 showing the new development in central Webster (Depot Village) along Main Street with the mills of South Village to its right. Note the railroads constructed in 1840 and 1865. North is to the upper right.



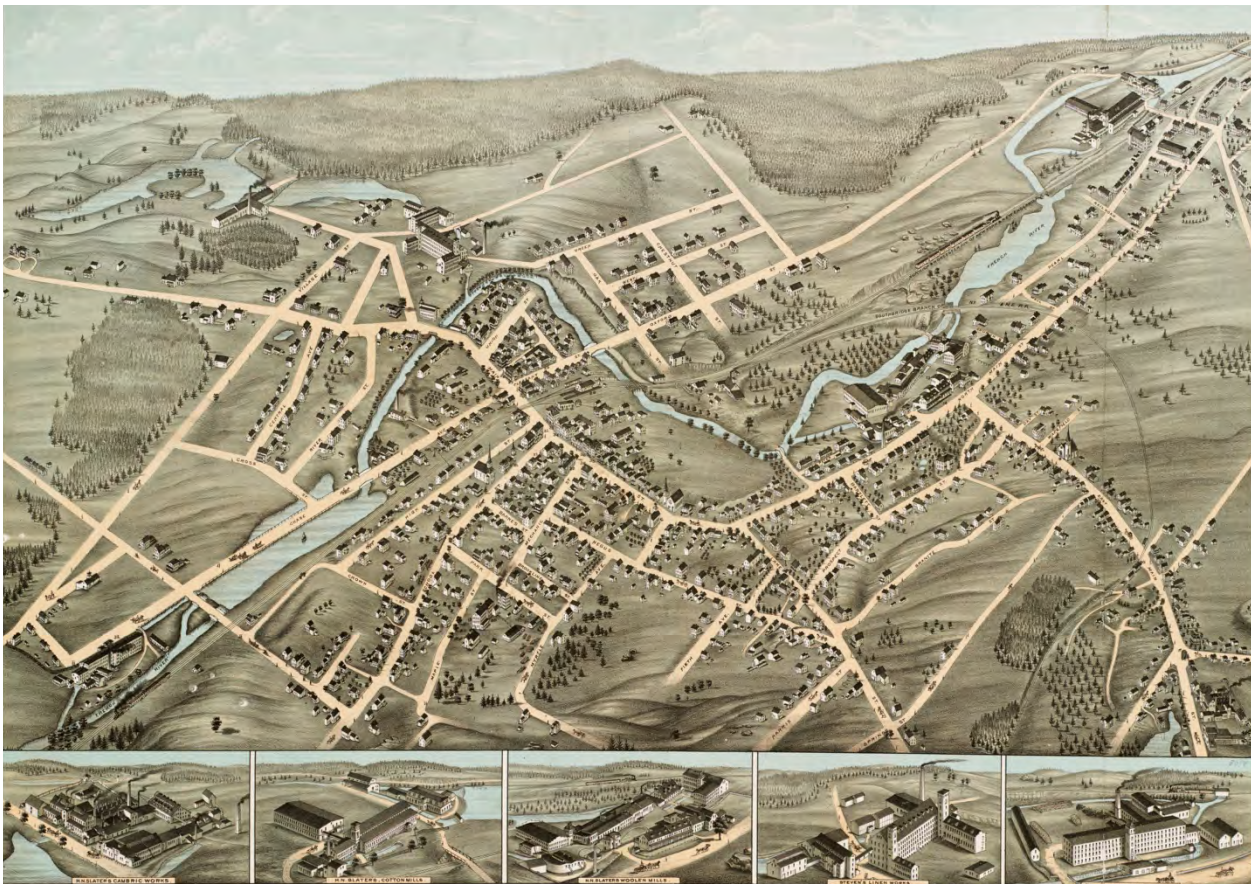
Similar view from Tucker 1984 showing the ownership of building in 1866.



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)

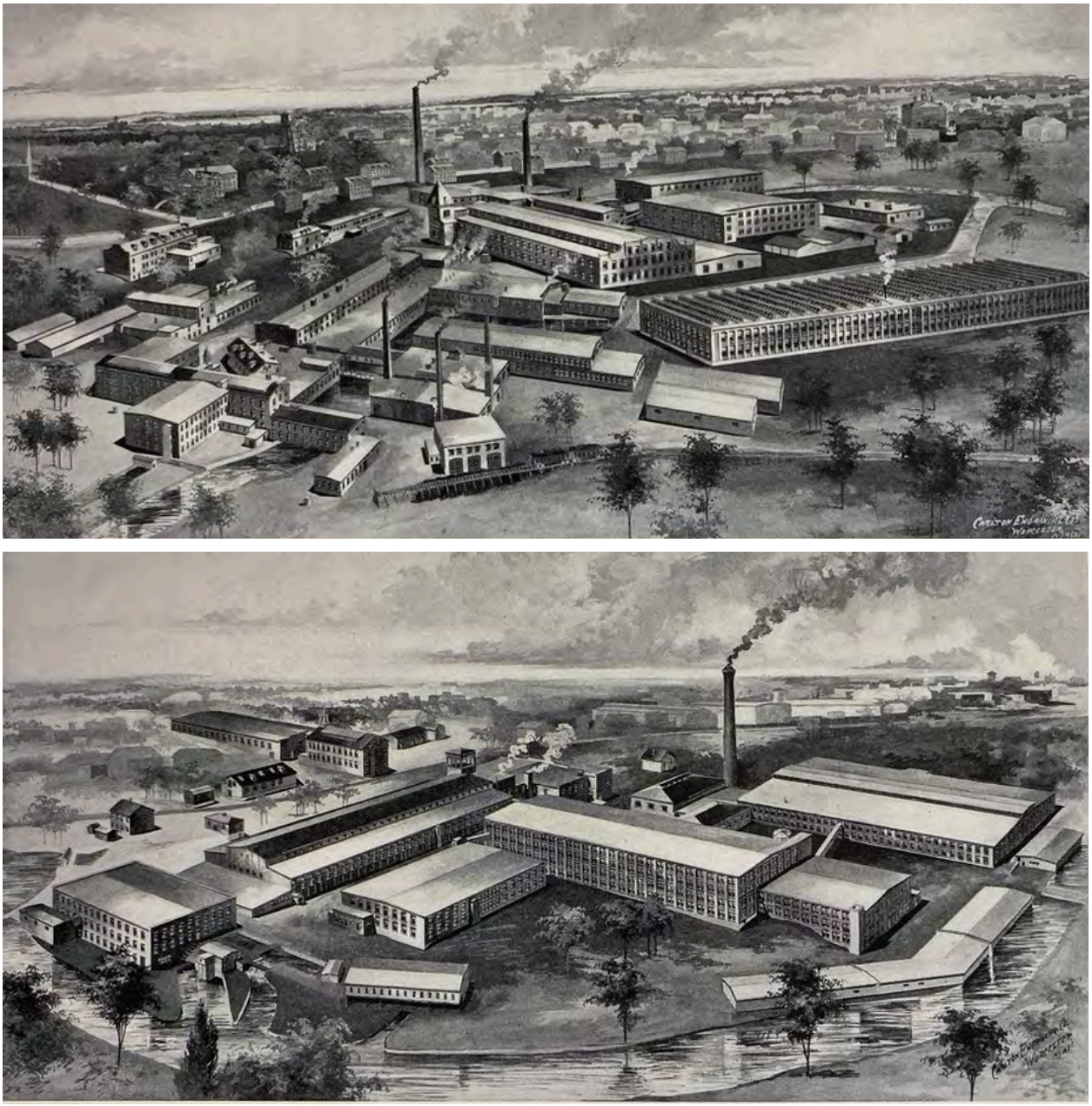
The development trends outlined for the Slater mills and Webster during the Early Industrial Period multiplied and came to full maturation during the late 19th and early 20th century Late Industrial Period. The Slater mills continued to modernize and expand, reaching the zenith of their growth and leadership 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.

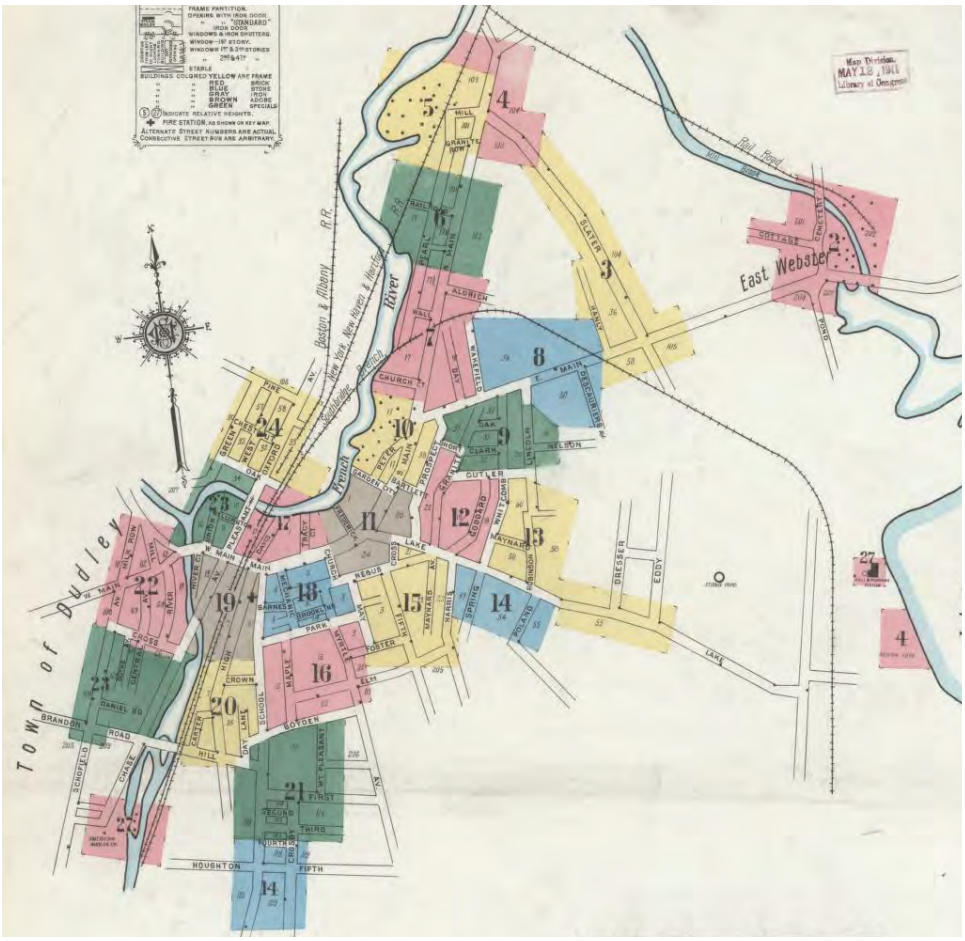


Drawings of the mills in South Village (top) and North Village (bottom) in 1912 showing their dramatic expansion. (Slater & Sons: 1912)

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.

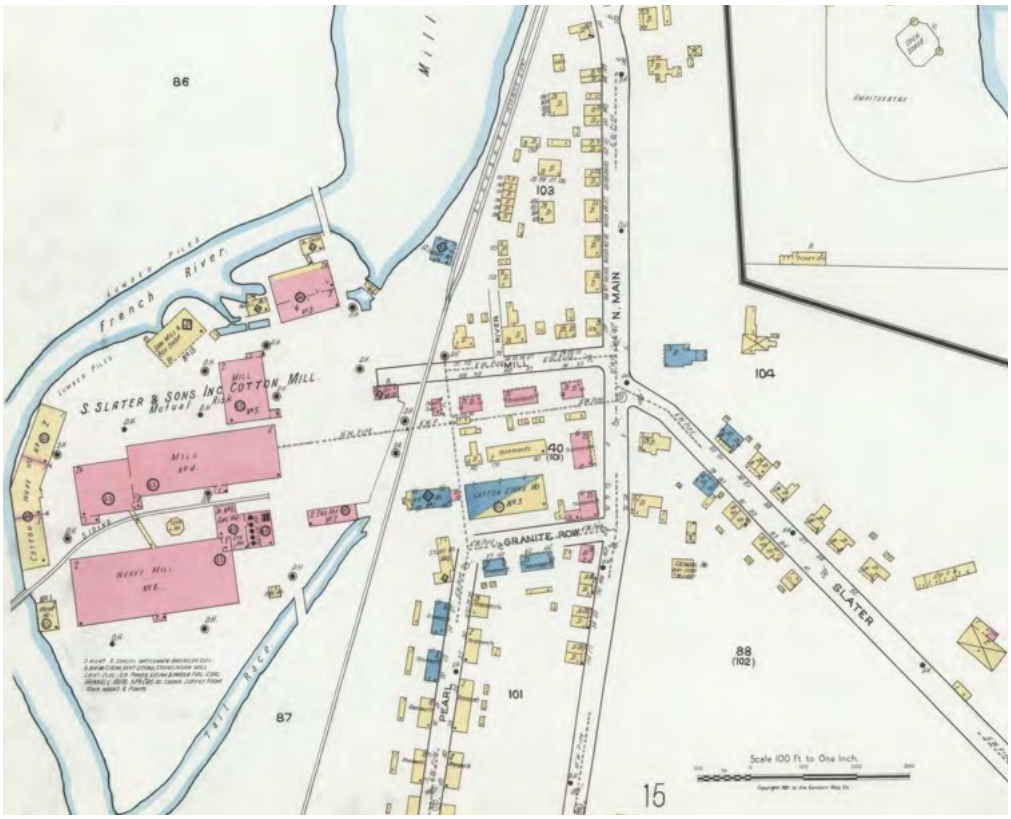
In 1928, needing capital and no longer requiring housing for its employees, Slater and Sons, Inc. sold its residential properties in East Village. Auctioned off were four cottages, 27 two-family houses, and two six-family houses. In 1935, three years before they closed down the mill in North Village, 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.

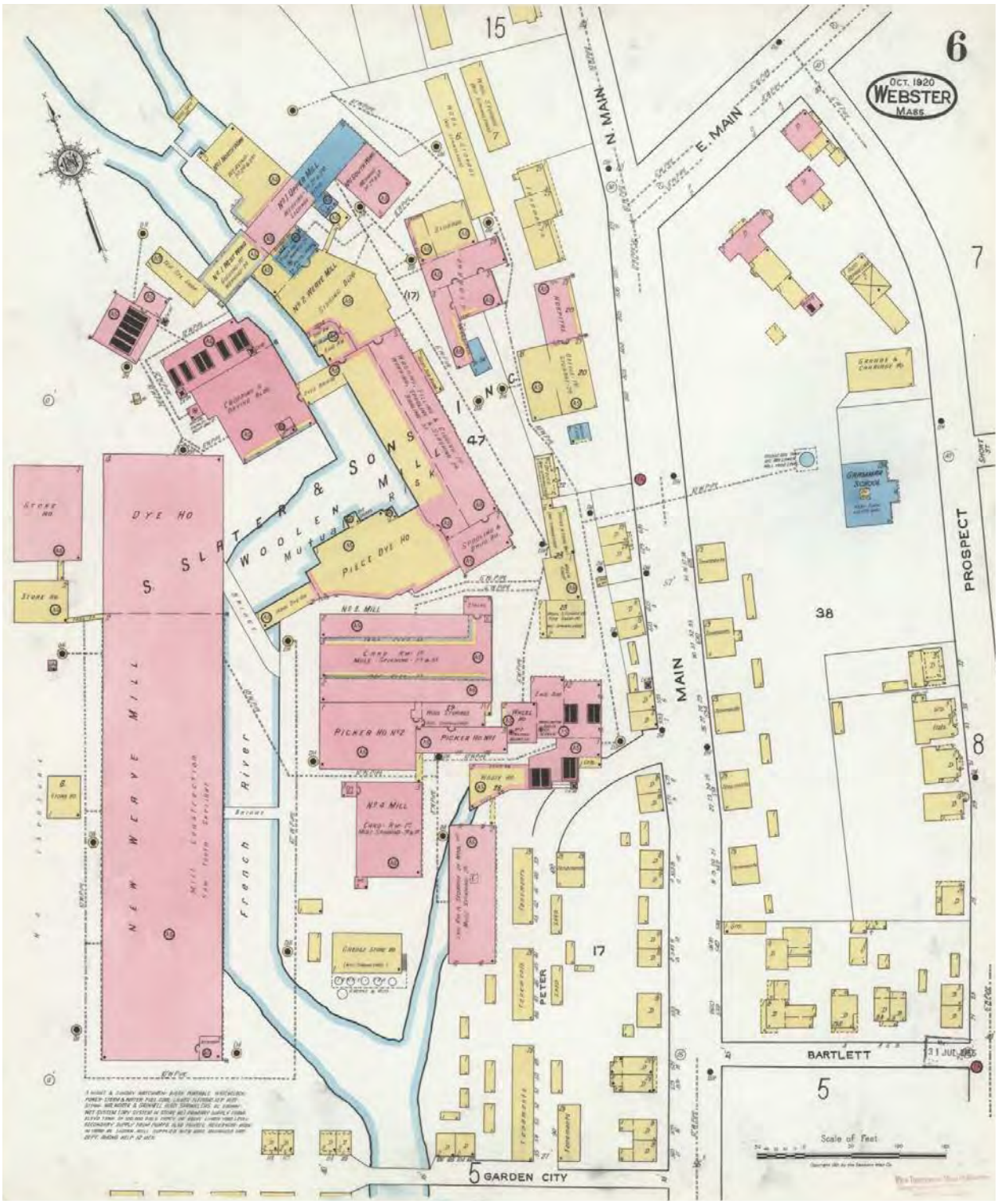
Downtown Webster continued to develop through the 1920s with the construction of several new blocks of large brick commercial buildings, fully establishing the historic downtown center that is the focus of revitalization efforts today. The Town's municipal complex was established at the east end of Downtown 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); Tiffany Block – 1926 (right)

Holden Block – 1921

Examples of culminating downtown commercial buildings prior to the Depression

Webster Municipal Building – 1928

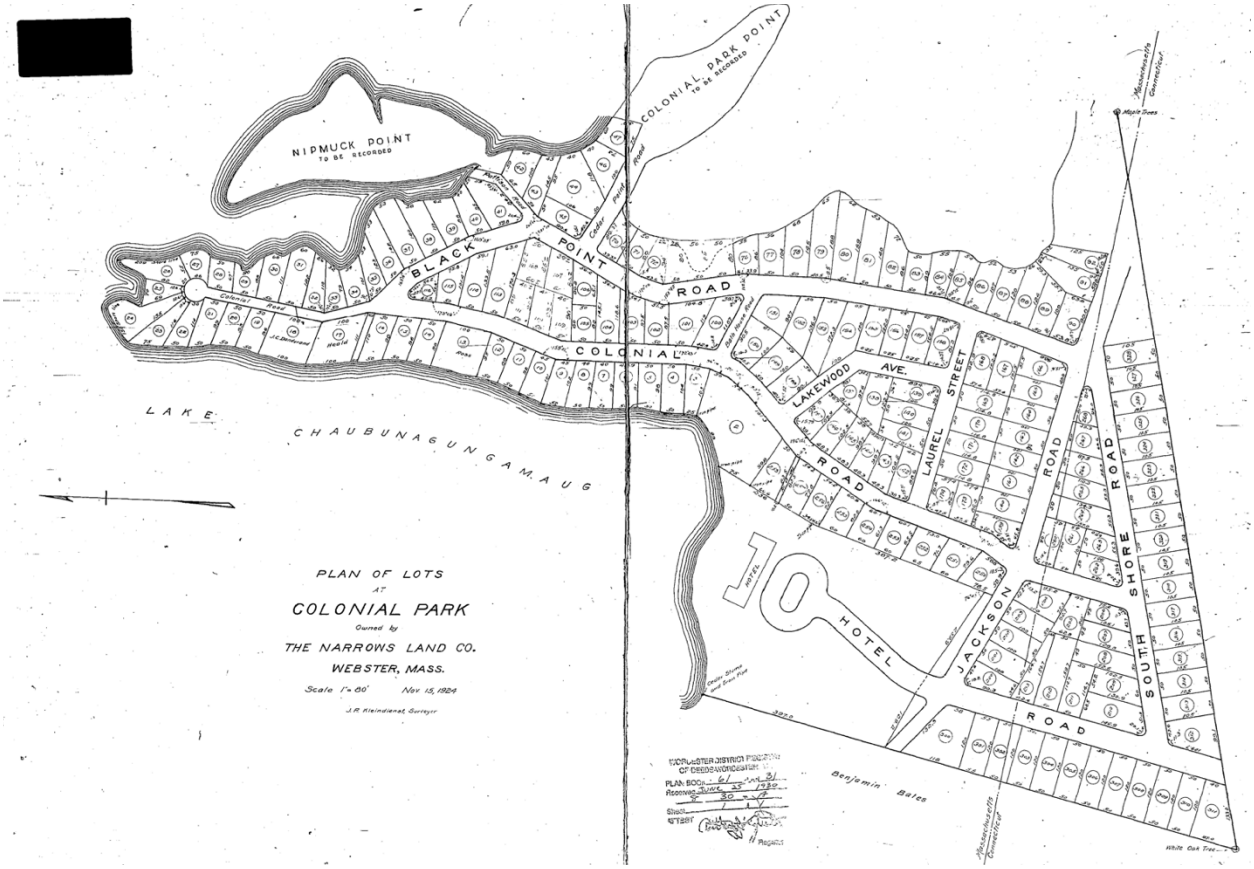
Three-Decker Worker Housing – c.1920s

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 directly 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.

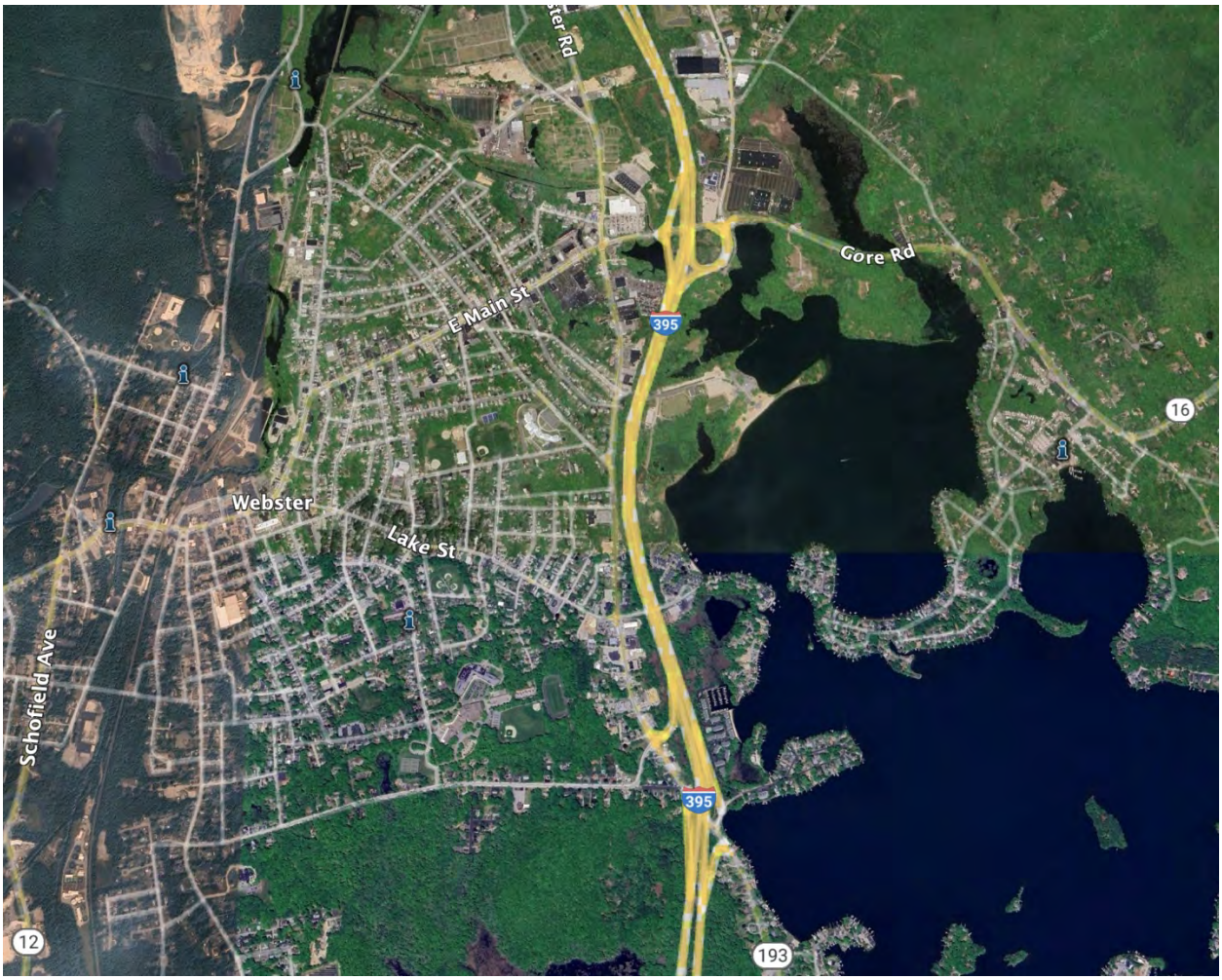
Despite the decline of the historic mill town, new suburban development in the late 20th century expanded the developed area of Webster's core between North and East Villages and adjacent to the late 19th century neighborhoods south of Main Street. Some of this land became free for development following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