



## 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.

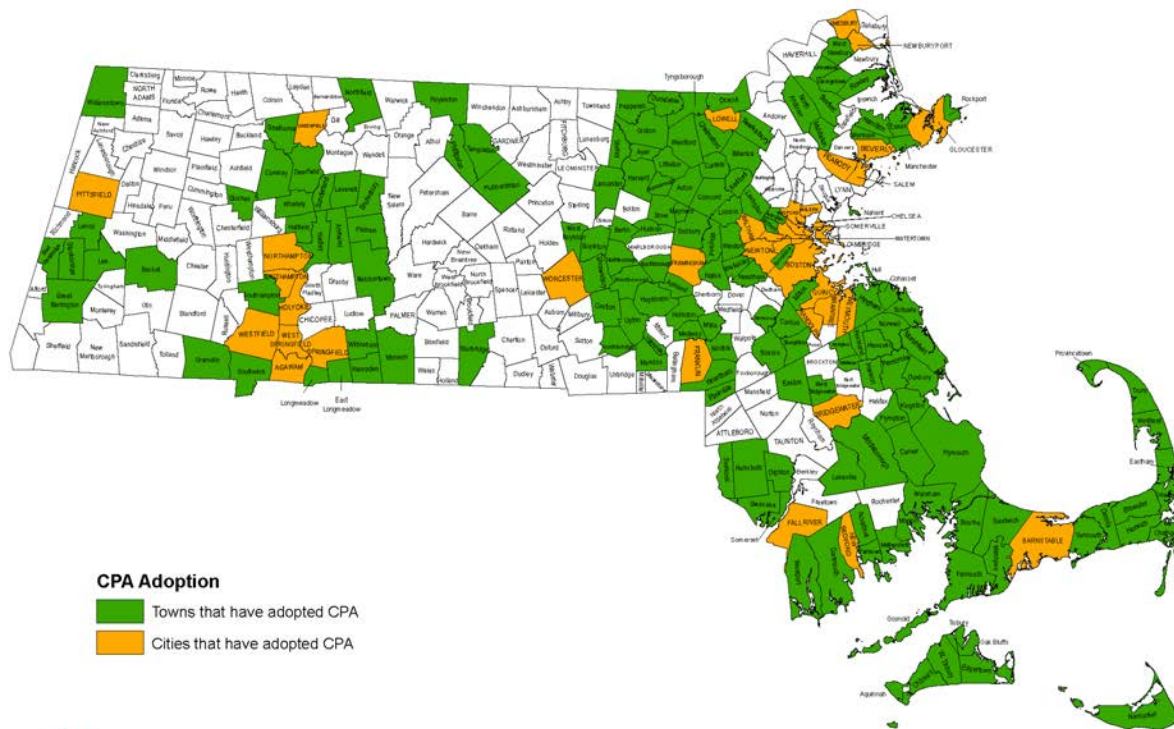
Massachusetts passed the Community Preservation Act (CPA) in 2000 as MGL Chapter 44B, which enables adopting communities to raise local dedicated funds for open space preservation, preservation of historic resources, development of affordable housing, and the acquisition and development of outdoor recreational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

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

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 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**

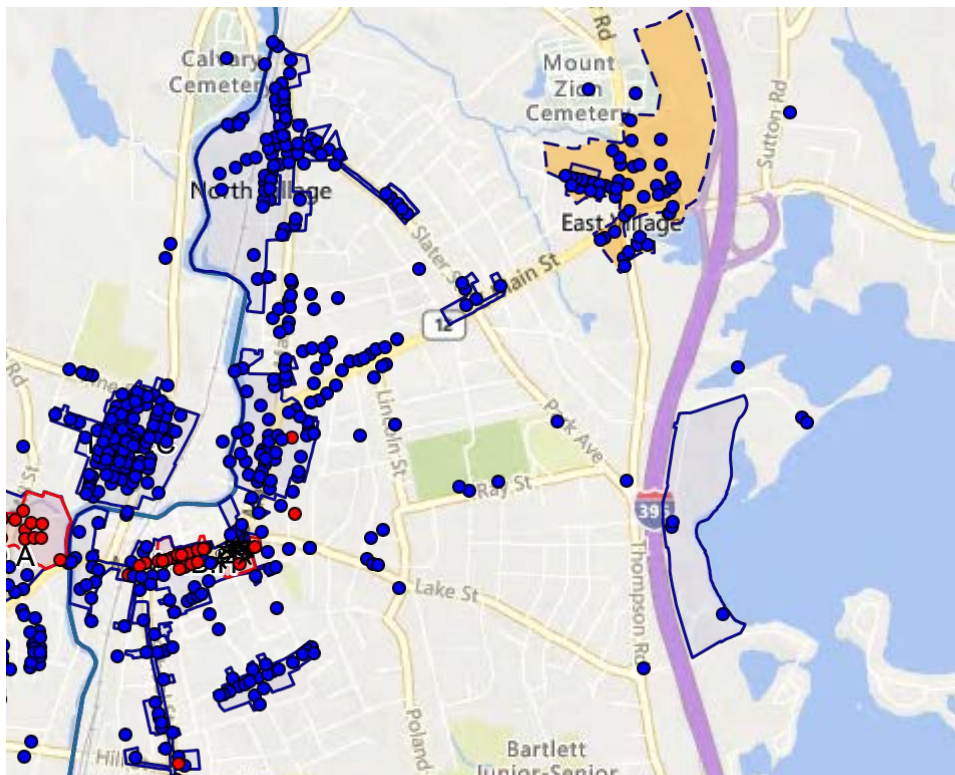
The 2000 inventory for Webster was undertaken by a professional consultant through a grant from MHC and with MHC guidance and technical support. The 2000 inventory updated and expanded upon the survey work undertaken in 1979, focusing on resources that were vulnerable to development pressure and resources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

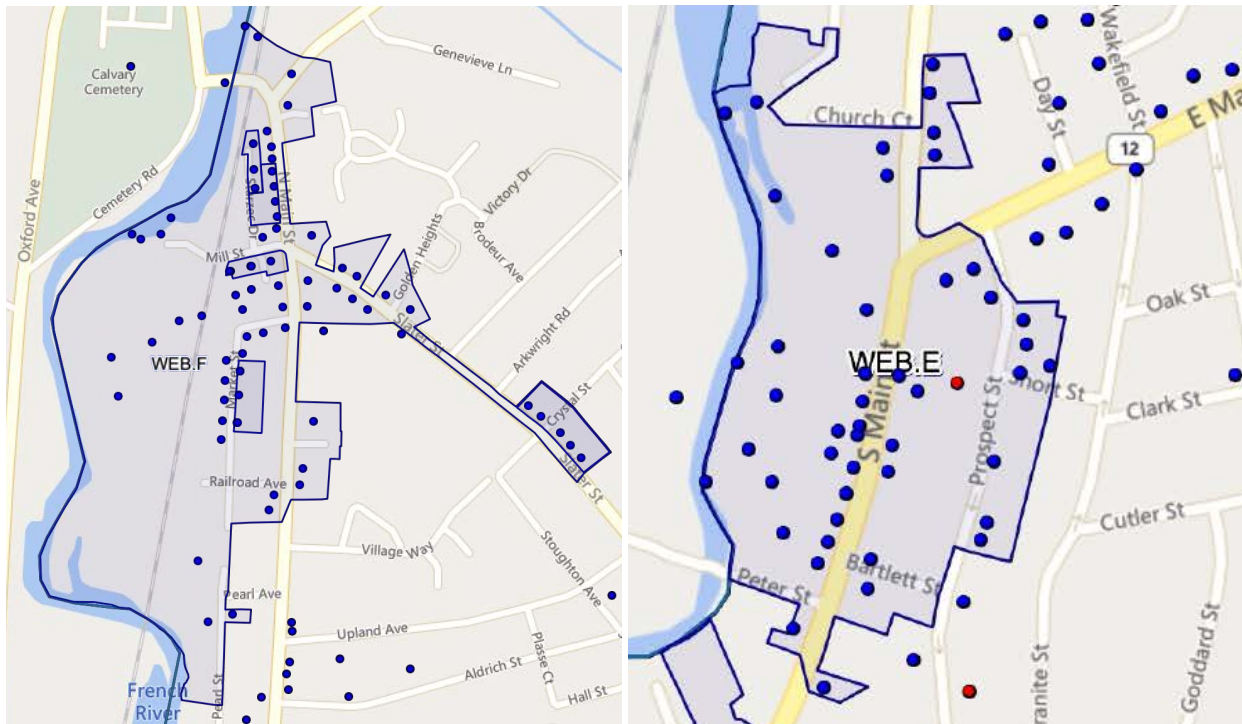


MACRS map showing inventoried resources in the mill town portion of Webster. Individual buildings that have been inventoried are shown as blue dots. Light blue areas are locations where area forms have been prepared. East Village, highlighted in orange, has been largely replaced with new commercial construction.

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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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.*

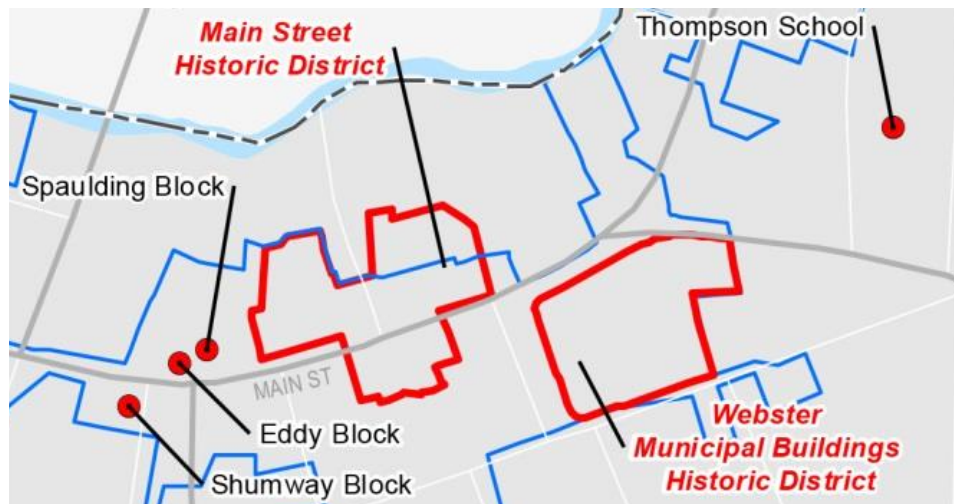
Webster Lake is historically significant to the Town and the region, however continuous and ongoing change has impacted its integrity as a historic area or district. This change will continue into the future, as property owners add to existing residences and build new residences.

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 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> and the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 historic character and integrity and should be recognized as critical community assets.**

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.

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

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.

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.

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

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

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.

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

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.



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 20<sup>th</sup> century single family residence on North Main Street.