

CHAPTER 6

Cultural and Historic Resources

*Westport Master Plan * 2004*

6. Historical and Cultural Resources

6.1 Goals and Objectives.

It is the goal of this sub-committee to preserve, protect, restore and enhance Westport's cultural and historic resources and devise ways to allow but control development in a manner which protects our heritage for present and future generations. Objectives include:

- Identify and preserve private cemeteries, Native American sites, and burial grounds.
- Identify and protect ancient ways and cart paths. This includes:
 - Incorporating them into the Town's GIS system.
 - Establishing incentives for developers to preserve them.
- Identify, designate, and preserve historical and cultural landmarks.
- Establish regulations that require developers to show existing stone walls and encourage their preservation.
- Adopt a Demolition Delay Bylaw to provide sufficient time to investigate alternatives to demolition of older or historic buildings and/or landmarks. [Adopted]
- Consider establishing additional local historic districts.
- Consider establishing a site design review board.
- Outline methods and incentives that would encourage development consistent with the Town's historical and rural character.
- Support and maintain Westport's fishing and farming industries, which are essential to the historical and rural character of the Town.
- Identify public right of ways.
- Increase awareness of and use of the Town Poor Farm as a cultural and historic resource. The Town may wish to consider improving public access for recreational use.

6.2 Inventory of Cultural and Historic Resources

6.2.1 Agricultural Resources

The soil and climate of Westport are suitable for farming, particularly dairy farming, and one of the basic activities in town has been – and to some extent remains – farming. Farming is threatened by economic factors, of course, and also by encroachment by housing developments. It is also threatened by the desires of newer residents to live in a bucolic but quiet and odor-free environment.

The long views of farmlands along our roadways are among the most cherished in Westport, reminding us of our history, our present, and our future. In Westport, 8,320 acres are enrolled in the Chapter 61A tax relief program as of 2001, giving the town right of first refusal before the land is developed and converted to another use. This is down from 8,529 acres just two years ago. Otherwise, Chapter 61A provides little protection of our farming heritage. Not all farmland is enrolled in 61A. Approximately 1,500 acres are under the Agricultural Preservation Restriction (APR) program, permanently severing development rights from the land. This translates to more than 7,000 acres of unprotected farmland in the Town.

A downward spiral that begins with needing a second job to pay bills jeopardizes farmers. Farmers must tap into technology and resources from state and federal assistance with little extra time. Roadside lots are frequently sold off for extra funds, and ultimately large farmsteads are vulnerable to development as land prices become more tempting. Our way of life is dependent on farm sustainability and viability and several farmers have been successful in figuring this out.

There is a direct correlation between a farmer's comfort with available technology and his or her success. This is no longer just the farmers' problem—it is ours if we want to preserve the rural character of the land for future generations.

Viewing agriculture as having potential for economic development is the key to its preservation. We cannot have farms without the farmer. Protection of the geography essential to Westport translates to advocating for the farmer who will bring his or her methods up to date in order to be both a profitable and sustainable steward of the land.

6.2.2 Marine Resources

The other traditional backbone of the Westport economy has been fishing, first for whale as well as finfish, and more recently for crustaceans and finfish. The catch annually brings a good deal of money to the Town and supports a sizable population of fishermen. Shell fishing is threatened by pollution of the rivers, and sea fishing requires constant maintenance of dock facilities.

6.2.3 Scenic Resources

Westport is a pretty place, and many of its most attractive features are in danger of being lost through over development. There are numerous fine vistas over fields and woods to the rivers and the ocean; and the roads are often lined by trees and fine old stone walls: every new house is apt to destroy both a vista and a section of treed property and stone walls.

6.2.4 Historic Resources

The first structure in Westport – soon destroyed during King Philip's War – was constructed at the Head about 1671. There are to our knowledge no seventeenth century structures still standing in town. There are many, however, from the eighteenth century, notably the Handy House of 1712. We tend to lose one or two of these structures annually either to decay or development.

6.2.4.1 Historic Sites

The Historical Commission has studied and listed many of the historic structures in Town. This list is available at the Free Public Library, the Historical Society, and Town Hall, and the original resides with the Massachusetts Historical Society. A Demolition Delay By-Law, which provides some protection for these older structures, was approved by the 2002 Town Meeting. The Commission did not investigate ancient industrial sites and the location of ancient ways and cart paths; nor did it list cemeteries – Native American and American – that lie on private property.

6.2.4.2 Historic Areas/Districts

There is an Historic District at Westport Point overseen and to some extent protected by the Historical Commission. Residents of the area are planning to extend the District to the north. There is talk about creating an Historic District also at the Head of Westport, and that would be a very good idea.

6.2.5 Cultural Resources

The life of a town is enriched by the numerous organizations that spring up in answer to various needs. Some of these organizations are political, others religious, others still with a particular purpose. Old ones will fade, newer ones be created. We should recognize the importance of these organizations, such as the Westport Art Group, the Westport River

Watershed Alliance, the Westport Historical Society, the Holy Ghost Club, as well as the Grange and Veterans' organizations in Town. It might be well also to recognize certain of the business enterprises such as Lees' Market and White's Restaurant.

6.3 Analysis of Cultural and Historic Resources

6.3.1 Heritage Landscape Program

The Heritage Landscape Program is a pilot program of the Massachusetts Historical Society, and is designed to select and protect certain scenic areas of historical interest in various towns, including Westport and to educate the public and municipalities about how to identify and preserve their heritage landscapes. They have studied Drift Road, and the East Branch of the Westport River, have prepared Massachusetts Historical Commission survey reports on these corridors, and have incorporated them into the Town's inventory of significant historical or heritage areas, thus now designating them as worthy of study and protection. It would be a very good thing if from this program – or some other – a recommendation would emerge for a by-law that would protect stonewalls, at least along the old roads such as Drift, Horseneck, Sanford, Adamsville, Main.

6.3.2 Areas in Need of Protection

Most areas in Town are in need of protection, and it should be in fact one task of the Long-Range Planning Update Committee to select areas in town that do not need protection and are thus suitable for development. Farms are threatened, rivers are polluted, older structures are torn down or allowed to collapse, stone walls are uprooted, ancient ways are ignored or used as road frontage for development, older industrial establishments are unidentified and neglected, cemeteries on private property are neither mapped nor protected.

6.4 Implementation/Action Plan

The Cultural and Historic Resources sub-committee recommends the following to the full committee and the Town:

- 1) All cemeteries be plotted and a by-law created that protects all burial grounds, these cemeteries to include Indian burial plots.
- 2) Ancient Ways and Cart Paths are a contentious issue, but we recommend that as many as may be located and mapped. Landings and other access to the water should also be plotted.
- 3) A list of the structures listed in the Historical Commission book be made available to the Building Inspector so that he may determine whether proposed developments will destroy or compromise significant structures. [This action was completed after passage of the Demolition Delay by-law].
 - 3a) We further recommend that an archaeological survey of the area north of the Head be undertaken to locate early industrial establishments. The Town should be very careful in approving the demolition or alteration of older buildings and construction on land that contains industrial remains.
- 4) We recommend that the draft regulations for builders under consideration by the Planning Board be adopted, and that these regulations serve to protect stonewalls and large trees.
- 5) We have drafted and presented a Demolition Delay By-Law to the Committee, and that By-Law will appear on the warrant for the 2002 Town Meeting. [This by-law was passed.]
- 6) We would encourage residents of the Point to extend their Historic District to the north; and residents of the Head to develop a Historic District there.
- 7) We recommend that methods and incentives be developed for individuals and developers that will encourage them to preserve historical and cultural resources (as defined above).

- 8) We recommend that the Town not pass any legislation or allow any developments that will impinge on the rights of farmers and fishermen to pursue their business.
- 9) We recommend that the Update Committee adopt a resolution that will protect the historic roads in town (named above) from destruction of the stonewalls that border them. It may be that a by-law (such as the one in Dartmouth) should be adopted.
- 10) The Town Farm, miraculously saved from sale or loss to the Town, is a treasure. We recommend that the property be preserved, and that serious attention be given to the potential recreational use of the land; and possible other uses for the structures.
- 11) We recommend that cultural organizations, particularly if they are housed in older structures, be protected and encouraged.

NOTES

For the complete Action Plan for Historical and Cultural Resources, please refer to Chapter 12, Action Plan, Section 12.4 Historical and Cultural Resources.

One Planning Board member felt that a form of historic district that was less restrictive would be preferable for any new areas of Town that might be zoned for historic preservation.