

VI. HISTORIC & CULTURAL RESOURCES

BACKGROUND

Lancaster's historic and cultural tradition is at the centerpiece of its community. Lancaster is the oldest town in Worcester County, and was the original "mother" town for much of central Massachusetts, including what are now Leominster, Sterling, Harvard, Bolton, Clinton, Berlin, Boylston, and West Boylston. The first early settlers came to what is now Lancaster in 1642, and the Town was officially incorporated in 1653 with nine families.

Lancaster was founded by John Prescott, who gave the Town its name based upon his home town in England. Lancaster was home to Mary Rowlandson, who was captured by the Native American's in the attack on the Rowlandson Garrison during King Philip's War. She survived and went on to write a book about her captivity – a book which is considered to be one of the greatest captivity narratives ever written. Lancaster's elementary school is named after Mary Rowlandson. Lancaster was also home to Luther Burbank (1849-1926), the American horticulturalist who developed the Idaho potato credited with helping Ireland recover from its great famine, and the Shasta daisy. Lancaster's middle school is named after Luther Burbank.

John Chapman, who came to be known as Johnny Appleseed, was born in the section of Lancaster that was incorporated as Leominster in 1740. John Chapman was a nurseryman, who came to own many tracts of land throughout Ohio and Indiana. He used this land to plant apple seeds, transplant seedlings and set out orchards. He sold and gave trees to pioneer settlers.

Beginning its town life in the 17th century as a pioneer and farming community, Lancaster became a summer residence for prominent citizens of Boston during the early 19th century. The location of the Carter and Andrews Publishing Company and the Ponakin Mills in Lancaster contributed to the next wave of town growth. Beautiful, tree-shaded roads and large New England style homes came to characterize Lancaster during this phase of its history. In 2006, a Special Town Meeting voted the American Elm as the Town tree, continuing the

recognition of the importance of trees to Lancaster's town character today.

Lancaster's rivers, its riverfront land, its traditional settlement pattern, and its extensive natural resources also are at the centerpiece of its historic heritage. Early settlers built homes and hamlets at the confluence of the rivers. Access in and out of town depended upon the bridges over these rivers. The largest oak tree in Massachusetts, the Beaman Oak, was in Lancaster on Route 117 east of Main Street. This oak, whose circumference was 17 feet, was located on what was the land of one of Lancaster's earliest settlers, from around 1659 - Gamaliel Beaman. The tree had come to be known as the Beaman Oak. The tree severely damaged during a storm in 1989 and had to be removed.

One particular family was critical in shaping Lancaster's history and in creating many of the beautiful historic homes that grace Lancaster's Main Street and South Village. Four brothers of the Thayer family, who made their fortunes in banking and railroads, during the 19th century, built beautifully designed summer mansions, many of which remain to this day. Their grandfather, Rev. Nathaniel Thayer, was ordained in Lancaster in 1793 and served as the pastor of First Church until his death in 1840. He lived in the parsonage, known as "The Homestead", which is now the site of the Thayer Performing Arts Center. Rev. Nathaniel Thayer was pastor when architect Charles Bulfinch designed the Fifth Meeting House for Lancaster. It was completed in 1816. Rev. Nathaniel Thayer had seven children, Sarah Toppan, Martha, Mary Ann, Nathaniel Jr., John, and Christopher Toppan. The four sons of Nathaniel Jr., Eugene V.S. Thayer, Nathaniel III, Bayard, and John E. and grandson, Eugene V.S. Thayer, Jr. built mansions that still exist today in Lancaster. Fairlawn, now the "White House" at Atlantic Union College, was built by Eugene V. S. Thayer, Sr. John E. Thayer built a Tudor-style mansion part of which still exists on George Hill Road. Bayard Thayer built a mansion called Hawthorne Hill, now the site of the Maharishi Veda Health Center. Crownledge, a mansion built by Eugene Thayer, Jr. in 1908-09, is now the home of the Trivium School. Only one of these many historic mansions built by Nathaniel Thayer III – the "Homestead" – is presently listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is now known as Thayer Performing Arts Center, Atlantic Union College. The Lancaster Historical Commission is working to inventory the other mansions and list

these on the state register of historic places.

Lancaster also has developed as an educational center. The Town is now home to several private schools and a college. Atlantic Union College, founded by the Seventh Day Adventists in 1882 as a secondary school, is now one of the most highly thought-of liberal arts colleges in the Northeast. Many of its campus buildings, especially Founder's Hall are of historic importance and interest. The Herbert Parker mansion on Sterling Road is currently privately owned. The Dr. Franklin Perkins School, founded in 1896, is located on 120 acres of land along Main Street that is the former estate of the industrialist Iver Johnson's widow, Mary Speirs Johnson, who built the mansion. The Perkins School is a nationally recognized leader in providing education and services to troubled children, adolescents and adults. Other private schools in Lancaster include the Robert F. Kennedy School, New River Academy, Living Stones Christian School, South Lancaster Academy, Browning School, and the Trivium School.

Lancaster's National Register Districts

Lancaster's rich historical heritage is reflected in the more than sixty historic sites and places of cultural interest, noted on the Historic & Cultural Resource Map. It is home to two national historic districts – Center Village, and North Village, whose boundaries are shown on the accompanying Historic District Map. Center Village and North Village were placed upon the National Register of Historic Places on June 8, 1976.

The Lancaster Historical Commission describes these two districts as follows:

“The Center Village District includes 110 early buildings and homes dating from 1727 to 1961, which include architectural styles of Cape style, Colonial, Classical revival, Colonial revival, federal, Greek revival, Italianate, Queen Anne, Victorian Eclectic, and Ranch. The Center Village is a quiet residential area of this earliest town in Worcester County. The district extends eight-tenths of a mile along Main Street from the Sprague-Vose Bridge over the Nashua River to the northern end of Main Street joining Route 117 near the North Village. Center Village District includes the beautiful center green, which is an unusual quadrangle upon which one side is Main Street, and on the opposite side stands the Thayer Memorial

Library, the Prescott Building (Center School), and on the south side stands the Georgian Colonial Town Hall and on the north side stands the neoclassical First Church of Christ, designed by Charles Bulfinch as the Fifth Meeting House, listed on the National Register of Historic Landmarks.

The North Village District, once known as Union Village, is a fine example of a rural nineteenth century community, and forms a significant architectural unit. North Village has a small green at the eastern end of the district. The historic district is roughly defined geographically by the Nashua River on the west, the Ponakin Brook on the north, a small brook on the south, and a series of hills on the east. The oldest house is c.1717. The architecture in the district incorporates various Federal and Greek Revival details. The houses vary in size and design, but are unified by their common building materials and setting. In the North Village, 22 buildings and homes received National Register Status. In 2006, the number went to 21 because one of Lancaster's only remaining inns (Fisher's Inn c. 1810) was sold, dismantled and is to be moved to Ohio where it will be rebuilt. The buildings and homes in this district date from 1717 - 1929.” (*Lancaster Historical Commission*)

A complete list of all properties within both National Register Districts is included in the Appendix.

In the 1980s, a local initiative developed in Lancaster to create a local historic district for Center Village. This would provide local review authority and greater protection for these important historic buildings and sites that National Register listing does not. This initiative was voted down at the 1987 Town Meeting. In 2002, the Lancaster Board of Selectmen appointed a Historic District Study Committee to reexamine the establishment of a local historic district and to determine what properties in addition to Center Village might also be included. The Historic District Study Committee continues to examine this alternative.

Historic Bridges

Lancaster's geographic location at the confluence of two rivers has made bridges an integral part of the Town's history and character. The Lancaster Historical Commission has found many references to

bridges in historical records as early as 1658. At the beginning of the Town's recorded history, the citizens who lived near the bridges were responsible for their cost and maintenance. The floods of 1936 wiped out many of Lancaster's bridges.

Today, two historic bridges remain in Lancaster. The Atherton and the Ponakin Bridges, built in 1870-71, were constructed using a design patented by Simon Post, a famous engineer, called a "Post-Truss" design. While this design was used for many 19th century bridges throughout America, few remain today. Both the Atherton and Ponakin Bridges are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Historic Cemeteries

There are seven town historic cemeteries in Lancaster, each with important contributions to Lancaster's history and early days. The Old Settlers Burial Ground, located on Main Street behind the Middle Cemetery became a public cemetery around 1643 and contains graves of the earliest pioneers. Old Common Cemetery on Old Common Road opened around 1700. North Cemetery on Old Turnpike Road opened around 1790; Middle Cemetery beside Bigelow Gardens on Main Street opened around 1800, while North Village Cemetery opened around 1854. Eastwood Cemetery on Old Common Road at the Bolton town line opened in 1876, and is the only Town cemetery with available new grave sites. There is a state graveyard on the site of the former Industrial School for Girls located off Old Common Road. Finally, the private Thayer Family Cemetery is located off Bull Hill Road. (See Historic & Cultural Resources Map for locations).

Many of the monuments in these cemeteries are fragile and deteriorating. A high priority of the Lancaster Historical Commission is to preserve and protect the monuments and landscapes of these cemeteries that hold important keys to Lancaster's past.

Endangered Properties

There are many historic buildings and sites in Lancaster that are in danger of being lost to physical deterioration, inadequate maintenance, inappropriate renovations, or outright demolition. Fragile historic monuments in the early cemeteries are crumbling; historic homes and buildings in private ownership are in need of restoration. New development along the river is affecting both the traditional riverfront

character, an important contributor to Lancaster's historic town character, and affecting the remains of historic river use such as historic water level markers.

The Lancaster Historical Commission has identified the historic features of the following public and private properties and sites to be so 'endangered':

Public Sites:

Town Hall
Prescott Building (Center School)
Memorial School
Tercentenary Building
South Lancaster Engine House (Hose House)
Atherton and Ponakin Bridges
All cemeteries: Old Settlers Burial Yard, Old Common Cemetery, Middle Cemetery, North Cemetery, North Village Cemetery, Eastwood Cemetery, Thayer Private Cemetery
All open land, including Pine Hill
Meeting of North and South branches of the Nashua River

Privately owned:

Deershorn Road schoolhouse
Thayer Mansions: Nathaniel (presently Thayer Performing Art Center), Eugene (presently Atlantic Union College's White House), John Thayer Tutor Mansion, Eugene Thayer, Jr. Crownledge (presently Trivium School), Bayard Thayer (presently Maharishi Veda Health Center)
George Hill Orchards (formerly owned by the Thayer brothers)
Rowlandson Garrison site
Herbert Parker house on Sterling Road

A priority of the Lancaster Historical Commission is to raise awareness about the importance and fragility of these historic resources and to develop strategies and measures to better assist and protect them.

Cultural Traditions

Until 2000, Lancaster was home to the Thayer Symphony Orchestra. Founded in 1974 by Dr. Jon Robertson as the Thayer Conservatory Orchestra, the Symphony moved to Fitchburg at the end of the 2000 season. Its home auditorium is now at Montachusett Technical High School.

One Saturday each fall during fall foliage and apple-picking season, the annual Horseshed Crafts Fair opens on the grounds of the First Church of Christ (the Bulfinch Church) on Lancaster's Town Green. The Fair is housed in 15 connected wood-framed

horseheds, part of the original sheds built in 1816. Scores of craftspeople sell crafts ranging from silk and dried flower art, Victorian dolls and jewelry. Several thousand people attend the Fair each year on the grounds of this National Historic Landmark.

Lancaster has a Cultural Council that supports the arts and cultural events and administers state-funded grants for local events. The Cultural Council has supported events such as the Three Apples Storytelling Festival, annual concerts and fireworks, musical performances at Thayer Public Library, and the Lancaster Coffeehouse.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

At the May and October, 2005 master plan community workshops, Lancaster citizens made clear that one of their highest priorities was the preservation of Lancaster’s rural and traditional character. Preservation of Lancaster’s historic heritage, historic buildings and sites, and landscapes are a critical part of preserving this Town character. Accordingly, Lancaster’s objectives for historic preservation and preservation of its traditional Town character are to:

- Preserve and protect the important and valuable historic properties and sites in Lancaster that contribute so much to its character and that are part of its heritage.
- Raise the awareness within Lancaster and beyond about Lancaster’s rich historic heritage and the scores of important historic sites throughout town.

IMPLEMENTING ACTIONS

The following actions are identified to implement Lancaster’s goals for historic and cultural preservation:

- Inventory, restore and protect Lancaster’s early cemeteries, giving priority to Old Settlers, Middle, and Old Common Cemeteries. Seek grants and funding to help restore these important historic resources. Work to list these cemeteries on the National Register of Historic Places.
- Conduct public education in Lancaster and beyond to make townspeople aware of the

importance and value of Lancaster’s historic heritage, buildings, and sites.

- Continue to explore the possibility of creating a local historic district for the Center Village historic area to better protect this “crown jewel” of Lancaster’s historic heritage.
- Preserve the integrity of the Town Green and its tradition as an open gathering place.
- Preserve and protect Lancaster’s historic bridges, in particular the Atherton Bridge and the Ponakin Bridge, and the river edges, major contributors to Lancaster’s historic town character. Explore how to better feature these historic bridges as tourist attractions.
- Develop strategies to protect and preserve the historic properties and sites in Lancaster that are endangered by deterioration, inadequate maintenance, demolition, and floodplain development.
- Explore the creation of a museum to safeguard and display Lancaster’s historic assets and records.
- Develop and adopt a demolition delay bylaw as also noted in the Housing Chapter to allow time for finding alternatives for historic structures threatened by demolition – for example, their relocation and reuse as an affordable housing resource.
- Reconsider participation in the Community Preservation program as one means to generate local funding for, among other things, historic preservation.

Identify and investigate a diversity of approaches to preserving the character and architectural features of historic homes while allowing for appropriate re-use if desired. One such approach might be an estate preservation bylaw that guides appropriate redevelopment of historic mansions and estates, such as that of the Town of Lenox, MA.

APPENDIX

Central Village National Register of Historic Places
survey of properties, June, 1973.

North Village National Register of Historic Places
survey of properties, June 1973.

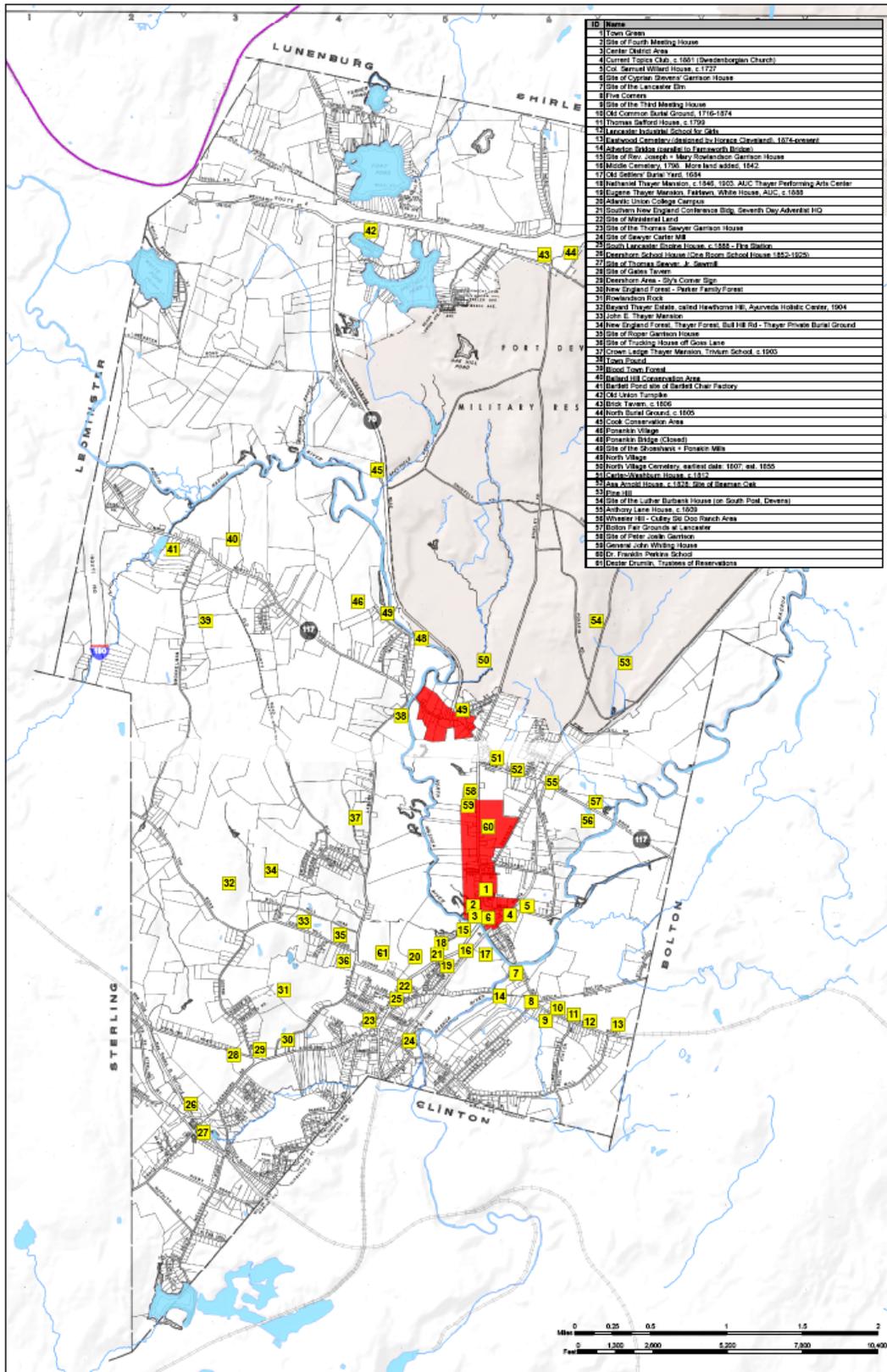
Memorandum from Lancaster Historical Commission
re: endangered properties, February 21, 2006.

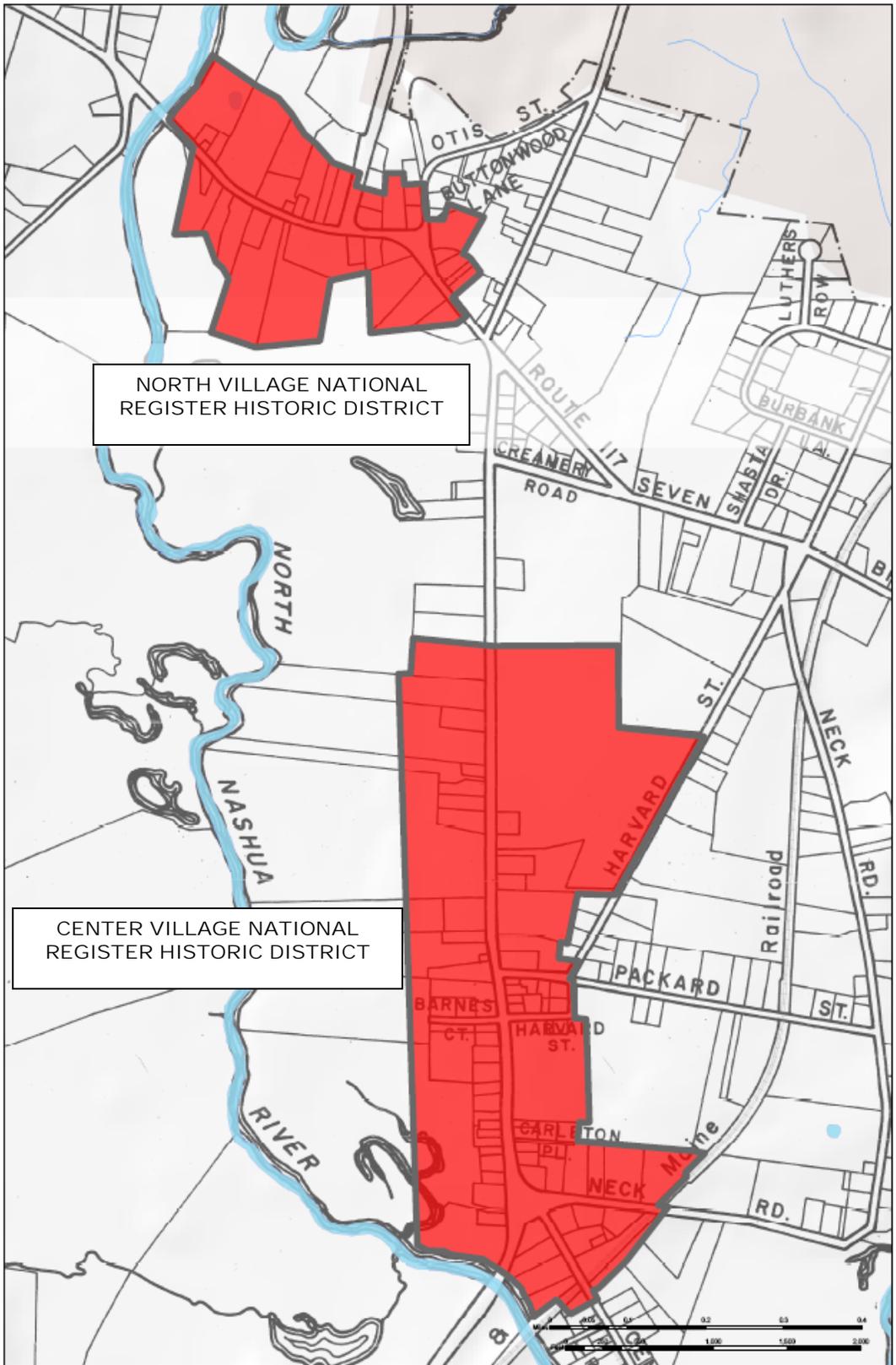
OTHER REFERENCED MATERIAL

“Lancaster On-line”, 2004
www.atlanticuc.edu/lancaster/history/index.htm

Peach, Joy H., Lancaster Historical Commission,
“Lancaster Bridges”, Town Report, 2004.

January 26, 2007 PLAN HISTORIC PRES
ELEMENT.DOC





NORTH VILLAGE NATIONAL REGISTER HISTORIC DISTRICT

CENTER VILLAGE NATIONAL REGISTER HISTORIC DISTRICT


Town of Lancaster, Massachusetts
 Master Plan 2007
HISTORIC DISTRICTS MAP

 Historic Districts

DATA SOURCES
 Boundaries: MapInfo 2006
 Open Street: MapInfo 2006
 Aerial Imagery: MapInfo 2006
 Roads: GIS/VectorMap 2002
 Water Features: MapInfo 2007
Additional features compiled and overlaid by New & Jones Associates and references identified.
 Maps and data for planning purposes only.


GIS/VectorMap
 GIS/Cartography Reference Provided by
 New & Jones Associates
 January 2007
