



**TOWN OF WINCHESTER**  
MIDDLESEX COUNTY, MASSACHUSETTS  
HISTORICAL COMMISSION  
TOWN HALL  
WINCHESTER, MASSACHUSETTS 01890

**Researching the History of Buildings in Winchester, MA**  
March 9, 2017

**I. Introduction**

The revised and updated Chapter 14 of the By-Laws of the Town of Winchester, “Preservation of Historically Significant Buildings,” was adopted by Town Meeting on November 14, 2016. Chapter 14 includes the procedure for the Winchester Historical Commission and applicants seeking a Permit from the Building Department to Demolish a Building that must be completed prior to the notification and thereafter issuance of the permit to the Building Commissioner. Chapter 14 also includes a component, Section 5, titled “Preemptive Determination of Historical Significance.” This Section 5 enables property owners to seek definitive determination of the historical significance of their properties without having to apply for a demolition application.

This document has been prepared for property owners seeking a Preemptive Determination, a Permit from the Building Department to Demolish a Building, or for people just interested in learning more about the history of their property. This document supports residents in preparing the recommended background materials for submission of an application. The underlined sources referenced in the “Methodology” section can be found in the “Common Sources of Historical Information” section, beginning on page 3. The criteria by which the Historical Commission judges whether a property is historically significant can be found below in Section II. Beginning on page 5, further guidance is provided in the addendum, “Common Architectural Descriptions and Terminology.” **If you have any questions about this process or any other related topics, please contact Brian Szekely, Winchester Town Planner, at 781-721-7162, or by email at [bszekely@winchester.us](mailto:bszekely@winchester.us).**

**II. Criteria**

The Winchester Historical Commission judges a property to be historically significant under guidelines drawn from U.S. Department of the Interior, incorporated into the revised Chapter 14 By-Law in Section 3.5 as follows:

*3.5: Criteria for Determination of an Eligible Building being a Historically Significant Building. If at such Hearing the Commission determines that the Demolition of the Eligible Building would be detrimental to the American history, architecture, archeology, engineering and culture of the Town, such building shall be considered a “Historically Significant Building”. An Eligible Building’s Historical Significance shall be evidenced by demonstrating that the Eligible Building has a quality of significance in American history, architecture, archeology, engineering and/or culture and which possesses integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and/or association, and:*

- (a) is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history,*
- (b) is associated with the lives of significant persons in our past,*

- (c) *embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction, or*
- (d) *has yielded or may be likely to yield, information important to history or prehistory.*<sup>1</sup>

### III. Methodology

When determining whether a property is a “Historically Significant Building,” the Winchester Historical Commission consults a range of historical resources for information available about the property. The following describes the resources that the Commission suggests, but does not require, owners to consult before submitting their applications. Each property is different, and in some cases resources listed below might not include information about a property, or resources beyond those listed below might include information relevant to the “Historically Significant Building” inquiry.

Determining the historical significance of any given property often requires knowing as much as possible about people: who originally built the structures, for what purpose, who owned the property over the succeeding years, when they were alive, to whom they were married and when, their background, education and occupations, their offspring, etc. Much of the research regarding historical significance focuses on these questions. Equally important are the qualities expressed through a property’s architecture: is a building an outstanding example of its style or type; is it an outstanding example of design or craftsmanship; and does it retain integrity of early or original materials?

The following provides some helpful tips on locating this information. This information is intended only to provide preliminary steps in acquiring information regarding properties and their owners, builders and architects. Please also note that the availability of records concerning historical figures can vary tremendously.

1. The most efficient method for researching a building or property is to begin with the 19<sup>th</sup> century commercial maps. These maps are fairly accurate and include streets, street names, lot lines, building footprints and owners’ names. These records are useful both for identifying original or early owners and bracket-dating buildings. Sanborn Atlases do not include owner names but do note uses and accurately show footprints. This method is generally the only accurate dating tool available until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. A secondary source for narrowing date brackets of buildings is the Assessor’s records, available in some annual reports and online.
2. With the name of the original or early owner, period directories and voting lists can be crosschecked. These sources often list names accurately (maps often only include initials) and include occupations and sometimes employers. Care should be taken because early directories often do not have street numbers or, in some cases, the street numbers have been subsequently changed. Voting lists also include ages or birthdates.
3. With accurate names and birthdates, a search can be performed on Ancestry.com. The most common information derived here is birth, marriage and death records, state and federal census records, directory listings, draft registration cards, and Mason membership cards, among many other records. Federal census records contain much useful basic information, including

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<sup>1</sup> Section 3.5 is contained in the revised version of Chapter 14, adopted by Fall 2016 Winchester Town on November 14, 2016. The criteria for determination of Historical Significance set forth in clauses (a) –(d) are the Criteria for Evaluation found in the Code of Federal Regulations, Title 36, Part 60.

birthdates, addresses, race, real estate and personal wealth, countries and languages of origin for immigrants, occupations, employers, family members, and household staff. Information varies somewhat from decade to decade.

4. Assessor's Records identify owners and generally provide the assessed value of land and buildings. They can be used to determine the year a property was improved through the construction of a building or building expansion. Note: the dates appended to properties listed in these records are not always accurate and should be cross-referenced with other sources.
5. Newspaper indexes can be checked with accurate names. The most common and enlightening information available in newspapers is often an obituary. However, a broad range of stories often surface in a search, particularly when property owners are active at the local, state, or national level, or through other notable deeds, awards, and occupations. In addition to searching by owner name, a search by property address can often unearth either real estate transactions or other events associated with the property. Important public buildings were often reported on in detail, including renderings, builders and architects.
6. A search with Google or Google Books using a full name in quotations is most useful for locating published obituaries, genealogies, and county and local histories, though, as might be expected, a myriad of potentially unrelated information can be derived from such searches. Care should be taken in cross-referencing material such as vital dates and family members to verify the identities of subjects. Researchers should also expect to find nothing on many figures, however, despite local or regional prominence. (Secondary sources such as *Wikipedia* should be avoided as they are rife with inaccuracies, false information, and opinion.)
7. Title searches are also often performed with owner names. There are two basic methods to locating deeds. A search can be undertaken by beginning with the most recent deed acquired through current assessor's records. Ownership can then be traced back through time, often well back into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Using grantee and grantor indexes available through county registry sites, names can be searched in the indexes to locate early deeds. Both methods are time-consuming but can often yield valuable information regarding the history of the ownership of a property.
8. *Note regarding architects and builders:* Records identifying architects and builders are often difficult to find or have not survived. Occasionally, architects or their commissions are reported in news accounts. More recent buildings, constructed since the 1920s, have surviving building permit applications in the records of the Building Department. Some repositories, such as the Boston Public Library, have collections of architecture firms. Finally, property owners occasionally hold onto plans or blueprints that are retained with the property through sales.

#### **IV. Common Sources of Historical Information**

1. Massachusetts Historical Commission: MACRIS: Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System (<http://mhc-macris.net/>)
  - This database can be checked by address to see if a property has been previously documented
  - If there is no match on-line, proceed to the Winchester Archival Center, where paper copies of forms that have not yet been entered into MACRIS are available

2. Winchester Archival Center (WAC) – Town Hall basement
  - 1854 H.F. Walling *Map of the Town of Winchester*
  - 1875 J.B. Beers & Co. *Atlas of Middlesex County, Massachusetts*
  - 1889 Geo. H. Walker *Atlas of Middlesex County, Massachusetts*
  - 1906 Geo. H. Walker *Atlas of Middlesex County, Massachusetts*
  - Annual Reports: 1850-1860 and 1895-1930: contain individual property assessments including addresses, owner names, lots, buildings, and values
  - Town Directories: 1874 – 1920 (some years missing)
  - Voting Lists: 1914 – current (most years available)
  - Sanborn Atlases
    - June 1894
    - Aug. 1899
    - Apr. 1904
    - Mar. 1910
    - Jan. 1916
    - Apr. 1921
    - Aug. 1929
    - Aug. 1929 – Sep. 1950 (this is the 1929 atlas with “paste-overs” dating to 1950 reflecting improvements prior to that date)
  
3. Town of Winchester Building Department – Town Hall basement
  - Local building codes were introduced during the 1920s, so the BD retains original applications for building permits in their active files dating back to the mid-to-late 1920s. These documents include owner names, builder names, architect names and brief descriptions of work to be performed.
  
4. Town of Winchester Assessors Department – Town Hall basement
  - Assessors Property Database (<http://winchester.patriotproperties.com/default.asp>) identifies owners and generally provides the assessed value of land and buildings. It can be used to determine the year a property was improved through the construction of a building.
  
5. Newspapers
  - The *Boston Globe* (1872-current) and *New York Times* (1851-current) are available through the Winchester Public Library through Proquest.
  - The *Winchester Star* is also available on microfilm 1881-current, and on-line from 1901 to 1951.
  - Local History Room: this space at Winchester Public Library (WPL) has an extensive manuscript index to the *Star* that includes names and subjects; articles are generally identified by publication date and page that can be accessed through microfiche. On-line viewing is not indexed and would require a very narrow range of dates to be useful, i.e. a birth, marriage or death date to the day. <http://www.winpublib.org/elibrary/databases>
  
6. Ancestry.com
  - This is available through the WPL or through membership. Effective use requires a name and approximate birth date. Care should be taken by cross-referencing available sources to verify the identity of individuals.

7. *Google and Google Books*

- These sources work best with precise names and middle names. Distinctive names often work better than common names. Care should be taken with secondary sources but this method can be very useful in locating obituaries and genealogies.

8. Title Search

- Many counties have made deeds and indexes available on-line, although Middlesex South is somewhat behind in this. Records are generally not available prior to 1974.

**V. Common Architectural Descriptions and Terminology**

Buildings, including those in both residential and commercial or other public uses (including government, educational, institutional, industrial and religious, among others) are generally classified by *style*. This system generally works well unless buildings, and there are many examples, fail to fall into an easily identified style category. A secondary system for describing buildings is by *form*. In many cases buildings can and should be described or categorized by both systems in order to develop a fuller understanding of their physical and historical meaning. Buildings in Winchester are generally easier to categorize by style and form because, due to the relative affluence of the town throughout its history, architecture here was executed in a *high style*. The following are lists of common forms and styles.

**1. Building Forms**

Octagon	Four-square	Split-Level / Raised Ranch
Three-decker	Bungalow	Garrison Colonial
Row House	Ranch	Cape

**2. Architectural Styles**

First Period (Post Medieval) Colonial Georgian Federal (Adam Style) Greek Revival Gothic Revival (Carpenter Gothic) Italianate (Tuscan or Italian Villa) Renaissance Revival Second Empire (Mansard) Victorian Eclectic Stick Style (Eastlake) High Victorian Gothic Victorian Gothic Panel Brick Queen Anne Shingle Style Romanesque Revival (Lombard) Richardsonian Romanesque Chateausque Colonial Revival	(Georgian Revival, Federal Revival, Dutch Colonial) – pre-1945 buildings only  Craftsman (Prairie Style, Arts and Crafts) English Revival (Tudor, Elizabethan, Jacobean and Revivals) French Eclectic (Norman) Spanish Eclectic (Mission Style, Mediterranean) Classical Revival Exotic Revival (Egyptian Revival, Byzantine) Neo-Gothic Revival (Collegiate Gothic, Modern Gothic) Moderne (Streamlined) Art Deco International Style Contemporary (for post-1945 buildings only) Postwar Traditional (for post-1945 buildings only)
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### **3. Common Terminology**

Style classification is accomplished through a combination of *form* and *elaboration*. Style is expressed through both the shapes and details that contribute to the composition and design of a building. Identification by style requires a practiced eye but can be accomplished by observing a wide spectrum of buildings. The classification and interpretation of buildings by style can be better understood by consulting among the many style guides that have been published during recent decades. The best-known and most respected, however, is Virginia and Lee McAlester's *A Field Guide to American Houses* (Knopf, 1984; a revised and improved edition by Virginia Savage McAlester was published in 2013).

#### **A. SCALE**

In addition to style and form, buildings are described in terms of *scale*. This is generally accomplished by identifying four factors: *width*, *depth*, *height*, and *roof type*.

##### *Width*

Building width is generally measured in *bays*. In the most common residential buildings, a bay can be observed from the exterior as an opening or cluster of openings that indicate the presence of a single interior space, or room. Openings can include both doors and windows. Most North American domestic buildings are constructed with three to five bays.

##### *Depth*

The depth of a building can also be measured in either bays or *piles*. A single pile, or framing unit, generally encloses a single interior space, or room, and can also be read from the exterior by the presence of a window or door opening. Most buildings are between one and two piles deep.

##### *Height*

Height generally refers to the number of full stories above the basement. As with width and depth, stories can be read from the exterior by noting the number of vertical openings. Most domestic buildings have some form of pitched roof that encloses additional livable interior space. These are generally counted as half stories.

##### *Roof Type*

Common roof types: gable, hip, gambrel, mansard, shed, flat

### **4. Other Considerations:**

*Orientation:* North American houses are rectangular in footprint (there is a common exception known as the “Foursquare,” popular during the Progressive Era). During much of the 18<sup>th</sup> through first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the broad, or wider side of the house faced the public way. With the advent of the Greek Revival style beginning in the mid-1820s, builders began orienting houses with their narrow dimension facing the public way. The principal reason for this was a desire, based upon popular fashion of the period, to create a “gable front” that mimicked an ancient Greek temple, which was the model for the style. Each of these orientations are described as either a *block*, as in “gable block” or “hip block,” whereby the façade is composed of a wider three- or five-bay elevation; or *end house*, whereby the narrower gabled elevation serves as the main façade, usually three bays.

### *Complex Massing:*

The advent of what is commonly referred to as balloon framing during the middle decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century allowed architects and builders to break free of the box frame. Prior to this development the shapes of houses were dictated by heavy timber frames that restricted designers and builders to square and rectangular plans. With the development of “stick built” construction, building forms could expand outward into more elaborate elastic shapes, most commonly polygons and cylinders. It also became affordable to vary the silhouettes of houses dramatically with towers and wings. This new building technology happened at a time when architectural fashion turned away from strict classical symmetry toward exuberant “Picturesque” asymmetry. It is arguable that it was this technology that drove this revolution in fashion. This change can readily be read in Winchester’s built landscape as earlier subdued, symmetrical gable-block houses gave way to elaborately massed “villas” articulated with projecting bays and towers.

### *Context:*

Buildings are sited both within their own property, be it either the lot in which they were originally constructed or a fragment of an earlier much-larger property such as a farm or estate, and their surroundings. Contexts are important for developing a clear understanding of the building’s history. Building descriptions should therefore include descriptions of their lot size, frontage, landscaping, driveways, outbuildings and whether the building is sited on its original lot or a fragment of the original property. The building’s broader surroundings should also be considered: whether it is located in a neighborhood of similar buildings of the same age or is the oldest or largest surviving example of its type; whether use is consistent or mixed residential, commercial, industrial or institutional; or whether it is part of a larger collection of similar buildings that form a homogenous larger whole.

## **VI. Examples of Architectural Styles Commonly Found in Winchester**

The many 19<sup>th</sup>-century historicist revival styles present in Winchester, including Greek Revival, Gothic Revival, Second Empire (mansard), Italianate, Shingle and Queen Anne, as well as styles that emerged as a reaction to the excesses of these earlier styles during the Progressive Era such as Arts and Crafts (Craftsman) and the later style such as Colonial Revival, Modernist and International, can be identified by their details. Below is a list of details commonly associated with these styles most-commonly found throughout Winchester (along with photos of examples in Winchester).



Left: Gothic Revival (Carpenter Gothic) – Asymmetry, steeply pitched gable roofs, elaborate pierced bargeboards, lancet-arched windows, molded window hoods.

Right: Second Empire (mansard) – Both symmetrical and asymmetrical, mansard roofs (the one pictured here is a double-pitched roof with a steep lower slope, often pierced by dormers,

and a shallower upper slope separated by a molded “curb;” mansard roofs are generally straight but often have elaborately shaped lower slopes with concave, convex or cyma profiles), elaborate brackets supporting a deep cornice, paired windows, round-arched openings and bracketed window hoods.





Left: Italianate (Italian Villa) – Many similarities to Second Empire, including brackets, but the roof system is often a simpler gable or hip characterized by a pronounced low pitch. Both Second Empire and Italian Villa houses sometimes employ towers or observatories in their designs.

Right: Shingle – Characterized principally by informal asymmetrical massing and the incorporation of towers and



other dramatic projections combined with a uniform building envelope of rustic shingles. The style was modeled on the early Colonial-period “saltbox” form of New England and often included broad gambrel roofs in many designs (originally known as the “Modern Colonial” style).



Left: Queen Anne – Similar to and related to the Shingle style but distinguished by greater verticality, tall towers and the incorporation of an elaborate variety of siding such as shaped shingles and paneling intended to emphasize contrasting textures.

Right: Arts and Crafts – Characterized by the use of natural and hand-crafted



materials intended to convey a more-honest expression of structure and finish. The style often employs rustic masonry, wrought iron and simplified, more solid bracketing and exposed structural members evocative of pre-industrial craftsmanship. This style is often associated with the Bungalow form.



Left: Colonial Revival – Based generally on Colonial period high-style precedents; highly symmetrical and formal. Details include classical devices such as columns, arches and pediments supported by modillions. Revival examples are distinguishable from period examples through the employment of projecting elements such as side and entry porches.

Right: Modernist/Inter-national – Like the Arts and Crafts movement, these styles represent a strong reaction to the historicism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and generally strive to eschew all ornament and detail. These styles employ low-pitched (not flat) roofs and smooth surfaces with a strong emphasis on horizontality and a “machined” look.



Left: Greek Revival – high style examples such as the one pictured here often have a monumental portico supported by massive columns, here in the Ionic order, with a full enclosed pediment. The resemblance to an ancient Greek temple can be readily discerned.