

FORM A - AREA

Assessor's Sheets

USGS Quad

Area Letter

Form Numbers in Area

Massachusetts Historical Commission
80 Boylston Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02116

174, 175

Lowell,
MA

763, 764, 2223-
2345

Town Lowell

Place (neighborhood or village) _____

West Centralville

Name of Area Fulton Street Area
Cottages

Present Use Residential

Construction Dates or Period ca. 1870-1896

Overall Condition mostly good, some
excellent, a few fair

Major Intrusions and Alterations several
new homes, much new siding, many
porch modifications

Acreage 14.5

Recorded by Margo Webber
Preservation Consultant

Organization Lowell Historic Board

Date (month/year) 6/94

Photograph

(3" x 3" or 3-1/2" x 5", black and white only)

Label photos on back with town and addresses for all buildings shown. Record film roll and negative numbers here on the form. Staple 1-2 photos to left side of form over this space. Attach additional photos to continuation sheets.

roll	negative(s)

- 1 1-36
- 2 1-36
- 3 1-36
- 4 1-13

Sketch Map

Draw a map of the area indicating properties within it. Circle and number properties for which individual inventory forms have been completed. Label streets including route numbers, if any. Attach a continuation sheet if space is not sufficient here. Indicate north.

See attached Sketch Map for inventory numbers and attached Assessor's Map for boundaries of survey area. Lowell Inventory Numbers and MHC MACRIS Inventory Numbers are both listed on attached AREA DATA SHEET.

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Lowell Fulton Street Area Cottages

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ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION (continued) 2

The standard worker's cottage, of which most were built in the 1880s, consists of a 2-bay, gable end facade, framed by a projecting cornice with deep returns. The first floor has the entry to one side and a 2-window rectangular bay on the other, with the flat roof of the bay extending over the entry where it is supported by turned posts. Originally, the cottages were faced in clapboards, had two-over-two wood sash, shutters at the windows, and the entrances had turned or straight posts, sometimes with other modest wood trim such as jigsawed brackets. Today, many of the houses are sided, the porch columns and trim have been removed or unsympathetically replaced, and new aluminum windows have sometimes been installed. West Street and Fulton Street contain many houses of this type.

Another variation on the standard cottage is the same, gable-end design, with a three-sided bay at one side and a separate flat hood above the entrance, supported by wooden brackets, sometimes heavily carved and/or with drop pendants. Houses of this type are located on Rundlett's Court, Hall Place, and several are found on the south side of West Sixth Street.

Several properties consist of double houses. These are large rectangular, 2-story blocks with a pair of entrances in the center bays. A flat-roofed porch with wooden supports extends over the entrance bays. Examples are found at 173-175 West Sixth Street and at 84-86 Fulton Street. Another large multi-unit property is the 5-unit building at the rear of 159 Coburn Street. It is a large, flat-roofed two-story building with five separate entrances, each originally covered by matching bracketed hoods, but now considerably altered.

Among the earliest homes in the area are several large single-family homes along Coburn Street which were built in the 1870s. These tend to be situated on larger lots and are mainly Italianate in style, featuring bracketed cornices, projecting bays, molded window hoods. Examples include 117, 134, and 138 Coburn Street.

The area's homes have remained intact, with little demolition, and only a few newer homes added along the northerly portion of Coburn Street. Most are still owner-occupied and in good condition, although new aluminum siding and "modernizing" have in many cases considerably altered the character of details such as porch supports, entry hoods, and railings.

HISTORICAL NARRATIVE (continued)

A major change occurred in the 1870s when the mills no longer found it advantageous to provide housing for their employees. It was a time of economic slowdown, so they began requiring that all meals be taken at one's boarding house, and they let boarding houses take in extra "mealers" as well.

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HISTORICAL NARRATIVE (continued) 3

Infighting among various ethnic groups within the boarding houses was a problem, as was the need for more family-type accommodations. Meanwhile, Lowell's population increased incredibly, from 40,000 in 1870 to 80,000 in 1890. As a result, came new housing districts of dense, overcrowded tenements, many with poor sanitation, little or no ventilation, and generally unhealthy conditions. One area was nicknamed "The Acre", and the Irish tended to live there. Another area along Merrimack Street became "Little Canada" when the 1860s and 1870s brought a new influx of French-Canadian labor for the mills.

In response to these conditions came a gradual recognition that decent housing was needed for the mills' work force. A ready market existed for improved tenements as well as for small cottages that skilled workers could either rent or purchase.

Many local farmers, including several in Centralville, began selling off their land to real estate entrepreneurs or dividing it up themselves and entering the real estate business. Among the large farms in the area were the J. M. Richardson family farm and the Fisher Hildreth farm, owned by a descendant of one of Dracut's founders, Sgt. Robert Hildreth. Albert Viles was also a market gardener in the area, with his own home located at the northwest corner of West Sixth and Coburn Streets, where 116 Coburn Street presently stands.

Starting at Bridge Street and moving westward, development of this type began to take place in the 1860s and 1870s. All of the streets from Bridge Street west to West Street had been laid out by 1879, although development was still concentrated in the easterly portions of the area. Most lots were about 50' x 100', enough space for a moderately-sized home and a small yard behind it. Coburn Street, north of West Sixth Street, was developed in this manner in the 1870s. Among its early residents were S. B. Hall, a butcher/meat packer, who lived at 154 Coburn Street. J. F. Puffer, who owned a furniture store, lived at 117 Coburn and also owned 125 Coburn Street. G. A. Shufelt, a carpenter, lived at 134 Coburn, and G. W. Patterson, trade unknown, lived next door at 138 Coburn Street.

The installation of tracks on Lakeview Avenue by the Lowell and Dracut Street Railway Company in 1886 supplemented the horse-drawn railway on Bridge Street of the Lowell Horse Railroad Company. With ready access to the mill district from both the east and west, West Centralville, like Pawtucketville and Christian Hill, seemed to offer workers the advantages of rural life: gardens, sunlight, and clean air; all missing from the inner city tenements.

During the 1880s, the area was transformed from unbuilt lots to a densely-built cottage district. Many of the subdivided parcels were again divided into thirds by their new owners, and three tiny cottages were built on each, dramatically changing the character of the area from the way it was initially being developed in the 1870s. Albert Viles was the leading force in this change, retaining most of his properties as rental cottages. Tiny streets such as Vile's Avenue, Hall's Place, Coburn Place, and Rundlett's Court were inserted to give access to the new cottages, many times being named after the entrepreneur owning the parcels. In addition to

INVENTORY FORM CONTINUATION SHEET

Community

Property Address

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HISTORICAL NARRATIVE (continued) 4

Viles, L. B. Hall, J. Varnum, (who lived further east in the Christian Hill section of Centralville), J. M. Richardson, (whose farmstead was just north of the area along Hildreth Street), and Mrs. Mary Pitts were the main land owners/prospective developers in the area as of 1879.

The cottages were marketed as the ideal living situation for Lowell's skilled mill operatives. Each consisted of seven rooms: parlor, sitting room, dining room, kitchen/pantry, and three bedrooms, with a small yard for children. They could be rented for \$12/month, a reasonable price for mill workers. As described in George F. Kengott's The Record of a City, these houses were:

"an easy walk to schools, mills, workshops, churches, stores and places of entertainment. These homes are almost ideal. The rent is moderate, the house convenient, the style attractive and the location particularly fortunate."

The style of these houses was readily adapted from several earlier rows of workers' cottages in Lowell, such as the Dane Street cottages built in the 1850's, as well as from individual examples near the base of Christian Hill. These Greek Revival cottages had cornice returns, hooded doorways and three-sided bay windows to create a more complicated mass. In general, the architecture followed the lead of the upper class Italianate style popular in the city's finest neighborhoods, but scaled down and simplified considerably.

Meanwhile, individual owners began to purchase many of the cottages. Most had English and Irish surnames. Typical occupations of these early residents included cloth printers, operatives, and other skilled textile industry positions. This created a sort of Irish enclave in this portion of West Centralville, which was still in walking distance of Bridge Street and St. Michael's Parish Church.

Other ethnic groups such as the Poles eventually moved into other sections of Centralville, specifically closer to the river along Lakeview Avenue. St. Stanislaus Church still stands here, where it formed the core of the Polish parish. A few blocks further west near the Aiken Street bridge, a French-Canadian neighborhood with its own parish church of St. Louis, also grew up out of the demand for improved workers' housing in the 1880s and 1890s.

As for the Fulton Street area, by 1896, the entire area east of West Street was built up with small cottages, while the area further west was mainly owned by Albert Viles, J. M Richardson and Mrs. Mary Kenney, and would be only gradually divided up over the next 20 years.

The neighborhood continued to flourish well into the 20th century, and is today still an area of mostly well-maintained, owner-occupied homes. Its initial premise of offering workers home ownership in a modestly-scaled but affordable way has continued to keep the neighborhood strong in an era when many other parts of Lowell's housing stock have deteriorated because of the tremendous acquisition and maintenance costs associated with large-scale homes and multiple-unit buildings.

INVENTORY FORM CONTINUATION SHEET

Community

Property Address

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Lowell Fulton Street Area Cottages

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PLANNING RECOMMENDATIONS

The Fulton Street Area is among the City's best examples of efforts in the 1870s and 1880s to provide Lowell's mill workers with their own individual cottages, either owned or rented. The central section of the area retains its integrity to the greatest extent, and thus is potentially eligible as a National Register district, as discussed further in the attached NR Criteria Statement Form.

The greatest threat to the area's architectural integrity is the slow, insidious pattern of renovation in which, one by one, houses lose their character-defining details and original exterior building fabric in honest but ill-directed efforts to improve the neighborhood's appearance.

Several basic concerns are worth noting:

The negative impact of new **aluminum and vinyl siding treatments** is extreme, covering over the simple corner trim and eave brackets which help define the buildings' style. Renewal of original exterior surface materials, whether they be clapboard or shingle, will greatly enhance the area's character as a whole, as will refurbishing of the character-defining details such as brackets and entry hoods, which make each building unique.

Replacement of **porch supports and porch railings**, while necessary for structural safety, too often is done with railings and posts of incompatible materials and design, making the porches too heavy-looking for the cottages. Even simple, stock wooden posts lack the fine, turned detail still evident in a few instances in the area. Wrought iron railings and supports are also inappropriate, too light in scale, too contemporary in design, and not characteristic of the time period in which the buildings were erected.

Replacement **windows**, particularly new bay windows in the first floor bays, are often too large and out of scale with the original facade designs. New windows should retain the size and proportions of the original window design.

The tendency to apply fake **vinyl shutters** is equally inappropriate, as they are out of scale with the window openings, and shutters were not typical of the original cottage designs.

Property owners and their contractors need to be educated via workshops, seminars, pamphlets, flyers, and even free advice, as to the important design qualities and details that define and characterize the area. A tie-in with the City's permitting process is one method, but contact earlier on in the design process, possibly through trade-directed and /or neighborhood workshops, would be more effective.

INVENTORY FORM CONTINUATION SHEET

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PLANNING RECOMMENDATIONS (continued) 6

Several property owners have recently completed or are in the process of completing careful renovations. These could be used as role models to inform other property owners of options available to them other than the standard vinyl cover-up.