



City of Beverly, Massachusetts

Historic District Commission

City Hall, 191 Cabot Street, Beverly, MA 01915

The City of Beverly is rich in history. We proudly hail ourselves as being the first naval base, which was commissioned by General George Washington; as owning and managing property designed by the nationally recognized landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead; and for having significant historical architecture throughout the City. Fish Flake Hill is identified by the City, State and Federal Governments as a historically significant area. The site of the town's revolutionary and early national period maritime industries, and home to Beverly's merchants and sea captains, the area was the town's primary business district until the mid-nineteenth century. The following paragraphs summarize the history and evolution of the District.

History and Evolution of the Fish Flake Hill Historic District

One of the first settlers to build directly on the waterfront was William Dixey, who built a house and established a tavern in 1641 on what is today the corner of Front and Davis Streets. Upon Dixey's death in 1690, his waterfront holdings were divided among his heirs and the active growth and development of the area began. Beverly's location just to the north of the confluence of three rivers (Bass, Danvers and North Rivers) to form Beverly Harbor made it a natural locus for fishing activities. The area was notorious from the early to mid eighteenth century for the heavy smell of drying codfish (or flakes) that were being cured for both domestic use and transatlantic trade. The fish-drying yard being located just east of what is now Davis Street.

By the mid-eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century, the character of the waterfront diversified with new marine-related industries such as boatbuilding, rope and sailmaking, blacksmiths, cooperages and chandleries. Beverly's harbor activities surged during the Revolutionary period. By 1775, most of the town's workers were employed along the waterfront. In 1775, the schooner Hannah was fitted as an armed cruiser. Hannah's departure is said to mark the first foray of the American naval vessel. None of these early wharves remain today, the last having been demolished in the 1920s. One waterfront remnant is the Captain Hugh Hill warehouse at 62 Water Street built in 1797 for sailmaking and serving as a chandlery in the early nineteenth century. However, due to its small, rather shallow harbor, Beverly's waterfront remained modest in scale, never achieving status as a major port north of Boston.

The Fish Flake Hill local historic district contains 44 residential and commercial properties. Architecturally, Fish Flake Hill is significant for the large number of Federal-period residences associated with the waterfront's heyday, as well as later Victorian dwellings. In the years prior to the revolution, several sea captains and entrepreneurs erected fine residences by the

waterfront. One of the earliest was Captain Edmund Giles, who built his home at 26 Front Street. The practice of constructing residences at the heads of deep lots that ran to the water's edge and culminated in commercial wharves was common. Captain Nathan Leech built his home at 52 Front Street ca. 1764, overlooking his wharf (This house was moved to 49 Bartlett Street ca. 1870). Front Street became the waterfront's most developed and prominent roadway during this period. By the early nineteenth century, other sea captains, merchants, and former Revolutionary privateers also built residences overlooking the wharves and water below. Some of these houses that still remain today include Captain Hugh Hill's House at 50 Front Street (1780), Captain Zachariah Stone's house at 8-10 Front Street, who before the war is believed to have run an inn in his house, part of which may date to ca. 1730, and Thomas Bridges, a man engaged in the West Indian trade, built his house at 40 Front Street ca. 1789. In 1803 the street running along water's edge was formally platted as Water Street.

In 1839, the Boston and Maine Railroad arrived in Beverly and opened new markets for fish trafficking in Beverly for the next twenty years. However, the railroad also brought manufacturing enterprises unrelated to seafaring and commercial and industrial development turned north. Shoe manufacturing and other associated industries were established near what later became Beverly's primary business district. Beverly's shipping and fishing industries began a steady decline, and the residential neighborhood also declined by the close of the Civil War. Sea captains moved elsewhere, some to seek opportunities in neighboring ports. The waterfront's chandleries were replaced with manufacturers warehouses and then by factories associated with the rubber industry.

Industry farther away from the neighborhood had an impact on its character. Along the waterfront, the houses that had previously housed the mercantiles of Beverly were divided into rooming houses, while the large lots were subdivided and filled in by modest single- and two-family workers' housing. Laborers employed by the town's factories such as the United Shoe Manufacturing plant, which began operation in 1903 and was Beverly's major industry as well as its largest employer, came to the neighborhood, including immigrants from Canada and Italy.

In the late 1950s and 1960s, proposals were made to demolish buildings in the neighborhood through urban renewal. This was a strategy during this time to alleviate problems of urban blight. Plans included proposals for new multi-story attached housing. As a result of this movement, concerned Beverly citizens gathered and organized to protect the integrity of the neighborhood and the Fish Flake Hill Historic District was established. Fish Flake Hill has remained a dense, residential neighborhood interspersed with small businesses. Substantial reinvestment in terms of both renovation and restoration of existing buildings and new construction has occurred in the District.

Historical information obtained from U.S. Department of the Interior National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form for the Fish Flake Hill Historic District and from files of the Beverly Redevelopment Authority on record at the Beverly Planning Department.

The Fish Flake Hill National Register District

The Fish Flake Hill local historic district also falls within the Fish Flake Hill National Register Historic District, established in 1986. This district is larger than the local District overseen by

the Beverly Historic District Commission. “The National Register of Historic Places is a federal listing of buildings, structures, sites, objects and districts significant in our nation’s history, culture, architecture or archeology and that are worthy of preservation. The National Register is a formal recognition of the significance of a property but places absolutely no restrictions or conditions on private property owners unless there is state or federal involvement in a project” (Massachusetts Historical Commission 2002).

The Beverly Historic District Commission strives to ensure the longevity and integrity of the extant structures in the Fish Flake Hill local historic district. They also work to ensure that new development is sensitive to the character of the historic neighborhood. Please browse the materials posted on the Commission’s website to learn more about Fish Flake Hill.