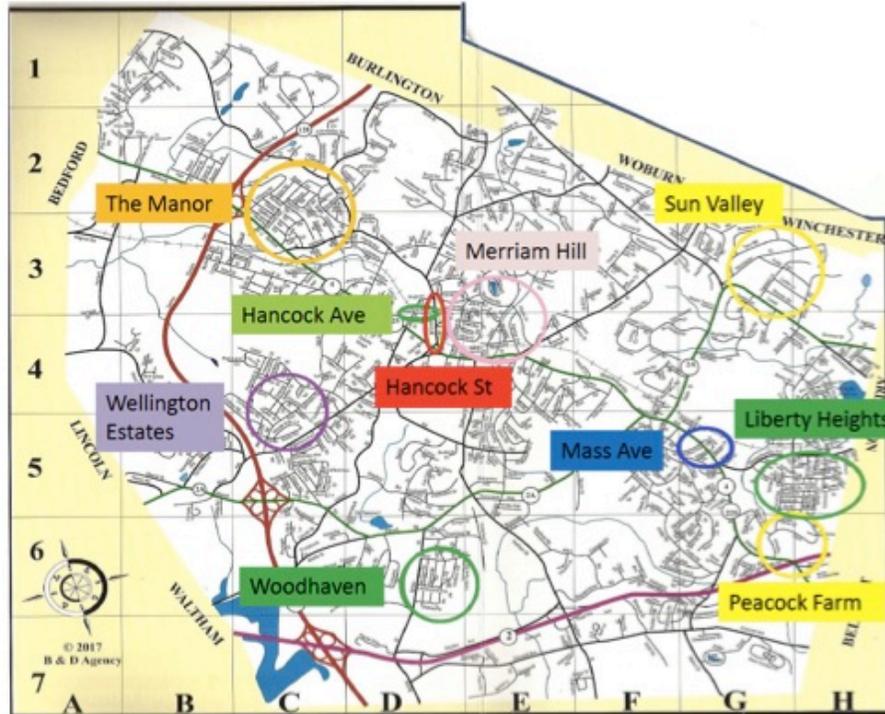


## Lexington Housing Developments Over Time



My job is to give you an overview of Lexington's housing over time, which is no small task in my allotted time. This will not be a compendium of architectural styles in Lexington because that has already been expertly done, using Lexington examples. You will find it in the comprehensive cultural resources survey, about which you will be hearing shortly. I will be focusing on settlement patterns, as the town's housing stock grew from 30 houses in 1682 to the 11,000 today, though I have chosen to discuss the ten developments shown on this slide out of the 58 that I have identified. I will be illustrating the architectural styles associated with these developments and often their design source.

In 17th and 18th centuries the vast majority of houses were associated with family farms and so most houses were scattered around Lexington. Historian Mary Fuhrer has documented that, in 1771, there were 133 farms. Each farm needed approximately 60 acres to sustain a family.<sup>1</sup> Well into the 20th century Lexington still had a farm based economy though the number of farms was rapidly diminishing.

The earliest surviving house is the core of the Buckman Tavern, recently dated by Dendrochronology, or tree ring dating, to 1710. An example of what is known as First Period architecture, it had exposed and decorated framing and other features derived from the English post medieval architecture. The house originally looked something like this. Here's part of the frame still exposed in the Buckman

<sup>1</sup> Mary Fuhrer, "Farms and Farm Family Life," Graduate School Paper, University of New Hampshire; and scholar-in-residence research at the Lexington Historical Society (2012).

Tavern kitchen. Three other houses with similar cores are known in Lexington, dating from around 1716.<sup>2</sup>

*Buckman Tavern, 1 Bedford St.*

*What the original part of the tavern, built in 1710, would have looked like (l) ; framing exposed in the kitchen of the tavern with original painted decoration (r).*



As the 18th century progressed Georgian and then Federal style buildings, derived from classical Renaissance architecture, prevailed. There are now about 30 relatively stylish 18th century houses in these styles. They were owned, no doubt, by the wealthiest inhabitants.

One example is the Hancock Clarke House, built in 1737, that housed the two the ministers, who served Lexington in the 18th century. Because of its association with the Battle of Lexington, the house is the best-preserved house of the period, and it includes this gorgeous woodwork.

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<sup>2</sup> John Mason House, 1303 Massachusetts Ave.; Stephen Robbins House, 1295 Massachusetts Ave. and Jacob Whittemore House, 21 Airport Rd.

*Hancock-Clarke House, 36 Hancock St., built 1737;  
and original wall paneling in the parlor.*



Another example is the Buckman Tavern, which evolved by about 1750 into the form we know today.

*Buckman Tavern, 1 Bedford St., as enlarged by about 1750.*



The house at 5 Harrington Rd. is an example of the Federal style.

*Federal style Levi Harrington House, 5 Harrington Rd, built 1794.*



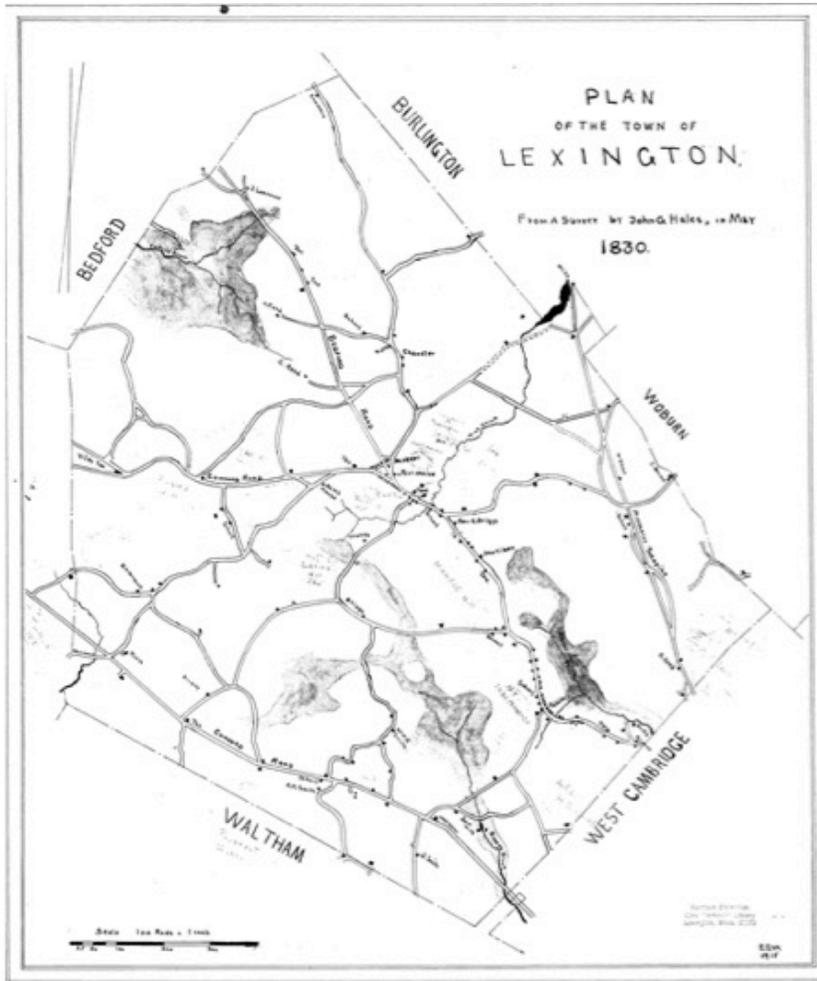
It is a given that the finer historic houses are the ones that survive, and that gives us a somewhat skewed picture of the houses of our ancestors. Most of the 158 dwellings known to exist by 1813 were of a different sort that tends not to survive. Here is how these ordinary houses were remembered at the end of the 19th century:

The inhabitants of those days had little means for luxury or show. They were industrious and prudent, and their buildings were in harmony with their lives. The local builders were not much inclined to the ornate, but rather favored economy and utility, [with] no architect [involved] other than the carpenter. Very few of the dwellings were ever painted, and those that were with only one coat, applied at the time of building. . . . The general appearance of all the buildings was one of neglect.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bryant, Albert W., "Lexington Sixty Years Ago," *Proceedings of the Lexington Historical Society* Vol. II. Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Historical Society (1900), 19-64; Fred S. Piper, "Architectural Yesterdays in Lexington," *Proceedings of the Lexington Historical Society* Vol. IV. Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Historical Society (1912), 113-124.

While most of Lexington had widely scattered houses associated with farms, houses also tended to be built along the main road through town, what we know today as Massachusetts Avenue, and after 1800 along the turnpikes at the edges of town along Concord Ave. and Lowell St., as shown in the Hales map of 1830.



*Plan of Lexington,  
by J. G. Hales,  
1830*

Beginning in 1830, housing was developed in specific areas as a result of certain events, or by individuals deciding to subdivide their land into building lots. The subdivision could be lots on a single street or hundreds of lots on multiple streets. A list of developments up through 1980 will be posted on the Library's web site. When you see the date that your area was developed, it is likely that your house was built after that date. Here are the 10 examples of developments I have chosen show you.

The first regional development was the construction of some 30 houses of similar plan in East Lexington along Massachusetts Avenue in the early 1830s. Eli Robbins ran a very successful fur dressing business that employed over 100 people. Thanks to him we have this significant concentration of the similar houses.

Of Robbins it was said.

No one ever contributed more to the making of Main St., [in East Lexington, now Mass. Ave]. Many of the large shade trees were set out by him, and many of the buildings he erected; his

lands were always for sale at reasonable prices, and in every way possible he was ever ready to lend a helping hand to others.<sup>4</sup>

870 Mass. Ave. (l); 884 Mass. Ave., two of 30 similar house, built in the 1830s along Mass. Ave. in East Lexington.



The Greek Revival style of architecture in town made its first appearance there. Robbins built what is known as the Stone Building in 1833 as a lecture hall. Isaac Melvin, a builder turned architect, designed the building.

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<sup>4</sup> Bradford Smith, "History of the Stone Building," *Proceedings of the Lexington Historical Society* Vol. II. Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Historical Society (1900), 145.

Stone Building, 735 Massachusetts Ave., built 1833.

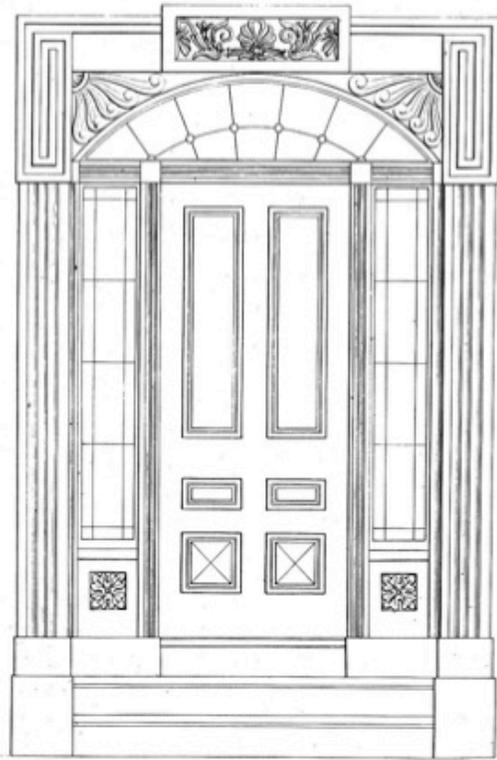


He turned to two architectural books of 1830 and 1833 by Asher Benjamin for decorative features of the Stone Building, as shown in this comparison of the doorway of the Stone Building with the design the 1833 book.<sup>5</sup>

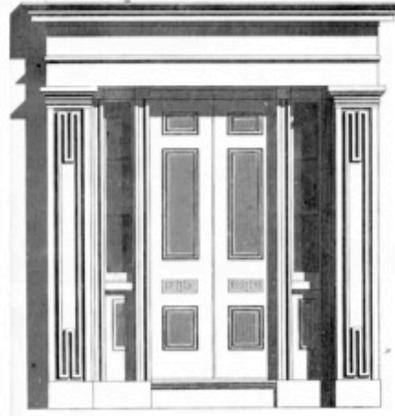
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<sup>5</sup> Benjamin, Asher, *Practical House Carpenter*, 1830. Reprint. New York: Da Capo Press, 1972; *Practice of Architecture*, 1833. Reprint. New York: Da Capo Press, 1972.

*Doorway of the Stone Building (l); drawn from Plate XXVIII in Asher Benjamin, The Practice of Architecture, 1833 (r).*



Melvin may have played a role in the creation of 7 doorways on East Lexington buildings also drawn from those books. Melvin would go on to design other buildings in Lexington and the region.



*Doorways in East  
Lexington inspired  
by PlateXXVI (I) in  
Asher Benjjamin's  
Practice of  
Architecture,  
1833.*



The next development was prompted by the coming of the railroad to Lexington in 1846. Hancock Street preexisted, but its proximity to the railroad station, now the headquarters of the Lexington Historical Society in Depot Square, made it desirable. Hancock St. shortly became the locus of stylish houses built by wealthy owners. Thus became known as the Court end of Lexington. One is the Gen. Samuel Chandler house, built in 1846, designed by Isaac Melvin in the Italianate style, loosely drawn from Italian villa architecture promoted in architecture books.

*General Samuel Chandler House, 8 Goodwin Road, built 1846.*  
*Designed by Isaac Melvin, an example of the Italianate Style and  
 a typical architectural pattern book source.*



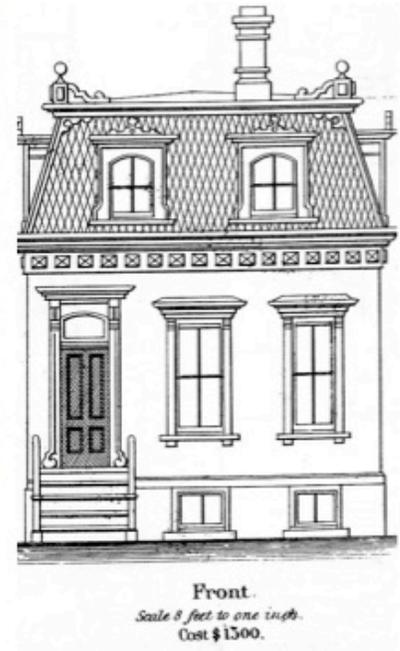
Naturally, the number of developments tended to parallel population growth in Lexington. The highest population growth rate ever was between 1946 and 1960, when the number of people living here increased by 130% and there was a similar increase in the total number of houses. This was the result of the great demand for housing after World War II, veterans returning from the war increasing suburbanization in general, farmers deciding to sell their land, and prospect of commuting on Rte. 128. It is estimated that 30 % of the current dwellings were built in the 1950s.

Although most people bought lots and built houses on them to their own requirements, some houses in the late 19th century of were built speculatively. The first were five story-and-one-half cottages with Mansard roofs, built by John L. Norris on Hancock Ave., off of Hancock St. in the early 1870s, similar to a design shown in *Bicknell's Village Builder* of 1872.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Bicknell's Village Builder* (1872). Reprint. Watkins Glen, New York: American Life Foundation & Study (1976).

5 and 7 Hancock Ave, built speculatively about 1873; typical design source: "Bicknell's Village Builder," 1872.



Two local builders David Tuttle and Abraham Washburn frequently built speculatively. Tuttle built four houses on Hancock St. for himself and then sold them, including this Italianate structure at 40 Hancock St. in 1847.

*40 Hancock St., designed by David Tuttle in 1847,  
in the Italianate style.*



Washburn enlarged his own house at 36 Forest St. in the Stick Style in 1896 based on a design in the *Scientific American Architects and Builders Edition* of October 1886. He built the same house for someone else on Highland Ave. Who knows if they were ever painted as shown in the magazine?

***36 Forest St, as enlarged by Abraham Washburn in 1896, based on a design published in the "Scientific American Architects and Builder's Edition," October, 1886.***



By the 1870s, Lexington was known as a particularly healthful town in which to vacation. It is true that, as part of the escarpment West of Boston, the town escaped the pollution in Boston, caused by burning coal.

In 1873, the southern part of Merriam Hill was laid out in 33 house lots. Beginning in the 1880s the area began to be built up. Relatively wealthy owners built substantial houses in such styles as Shingle Style, Colonial Revival and Queen Anne, many of them designed by architects for the first time.

*Houses on Merriam Hill in the Shingle Style (l)  
and Colonial Revival, (r).*



Similar upscale houses were built on Bloomfield St., Munroe Hill and Winthrop Road into the early 20th century.

By 1889, a number of people who first vacationed in hotels and went onto build summer residences eventually became year round residents. This decade was also when newcomers, many of whom were professionals who commuted to Boston by train, began to change the town from a farming community to a progressive suburb.

Two houses on Oakland Street were built by friends who had previously summered in Lexington. George S. Jackson, whose Queen Anne Style house was at number 17, chose to commemorate his move to a leafy suburb by enshrining part of Emerson's poem, "My Garden" in a stained glass window in his Queen Anne Style house. The poem speaks to the motivation of many of the newcomers.

*J. B. Jackson House, 17 Oakland St., designed by Allen & Kenway, architects; built in 1884, an example of the Queen Anne Style.  
Stained glass window with excerpt of Emerson's poem.*



If I could put my words to song  
And tell what's there enjoyed  
All men would to my garden throng  
And leave the cities void.

Beginning in the late 1890s others were laying out small lots to provide housing in Lexington for those who commuted by streetcar, which came in 1899, including at Meagherville, Liberty Heights, and areas on Mass Ave. in East Lexington. This is a house in Liberty Heights built in the Bungalow style, built in the 1928.

*85 Oak St. a Bungalow Style house in the Liberty Heights Neighborhood, built up in the 1920s.*



In response to the population growth in the 1920s, the Manor section of off Mass Ave in West Lexington was laid out in 1921. The largest subdivision ever at 298 lots, the Manor brochure stressed that residential zoning would keep out unwanted development, (zoning had been established in Lexington 10 years earlier). The brochure also states, "You owe it to your children to own your own home, where you can be independent."

# Lexington Manor

HAVE YOU EVER longed for, ever wanted an ideal home of your own? The great opportunity is now yours in this special offering of Home Sites for home folks at Lexington Manor.



*One of the beautiful residences on our property, on the bus line Bedford Street, 4 minutes to R. R. Station.*

Come and select your Home Site in Lexington Manor. We will help you own your home. Small first payment, reasonable monthly payments. Low prices easy terms.

*Homes financed for purchasers.*

*If you wish to build we will help you.*

**REMEMBER!** Where Lexington Manor lies your home investment multiplies. We will finance your home for a small payment down.

*Advertisement for Lexington Manor and streetscape. Houses built before and after WWII.*

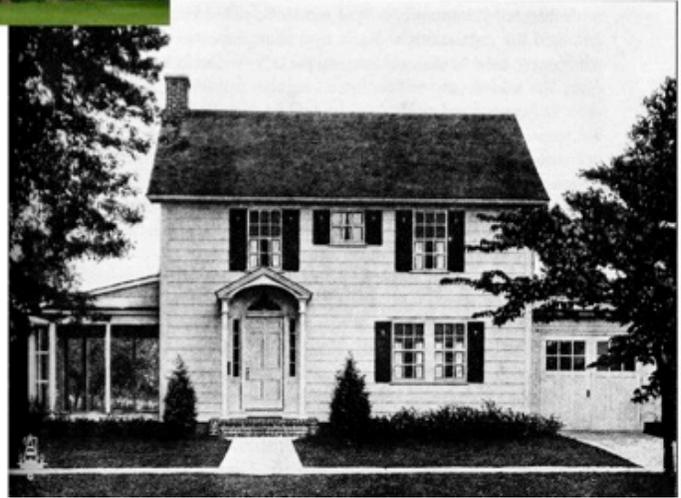


Many smaller houses were built in areas opened for development in the 1920s and 1930s. Some were based on designs promoted by the government's Small House Bureau, such as this one on 43 Hayes Ave.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Gwen Wright, *Building the Dream* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1981), 199-201.



*43 Hayes Ave., built in 1928. Similar to an Architects' Small House Service Bureau design (below).*



Between 1940 and 1950, Wellington Estates, a very interesting development of houses designed by Royal Barry Wills, who was known for his promotion of the Cape Cod style house, were built in North Lexington, adjacent to what would become Rte. 128. The houses were reproductions of various colonial styles. Other houses by Wills are scattered around Lexington.



*Houses in Wellington Estates, built 1940s, designed by Royal Barry Wills reproducing Colonial designs. 2663 Mass. Ave (1), 2 Constitution Rd., 2685 Mass. Ave. (below)*



Post WWII developments included the Woodhaven section that was laid out in lots intended to be purchased by veterans with the GI Bill. What became known as Sun Valley consisted on 200 houses built adjacent to the Winchester line in 1950.



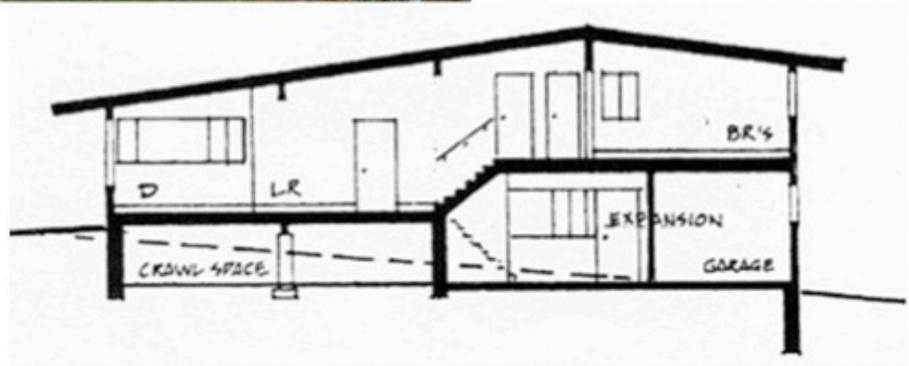
*37 Munroe Rd.,  
Woodhaven  
development, 1950 (I);  
2 Blueberry Lane, Sun  
Valley development  
(1950).*



A smaller, but architecturally significant group of houses were built in the Mid-Century Modern style in 9 neighborhoods in Lexington. While most houses in the style at the time were custom, these neighborhoods offered the advantages of a modern house at an affordable price.

One was Peacock Farm, developed by Walter Pierce and Danforth Compton, where the majority of the houses were of the "Peacock Farm House" design, a split-level modern house that won awards. Subsequently this house was built between 1960 and 1966 at the Glen, the Grove, Rumford Rd. Upper Turning Mill Rd., and Pleasant Brook by developers Green and White, who acquired the rights to the plan from Pierce.

*Peacock Farm House, 5 Compton Circle, built 1957, designed by Walter Pierce, architect and section drawing.*



I am not sure how many of the developments that I have cited have neighborhood associations. I can think of seven. I'd be interested to hear of more. Invariably these associations lead to more interactions with neighbors and a greater sense of community.

For most of these developments you can read more in Lexington's Cultural Resource Survey.

Presented by Anne Grady, Architectural Historian, at a panel, "Discover Your Home's History," Cary Memorial Library, Sept. 22, 2018.