

SECTION 3. COMMUNITY SETTING

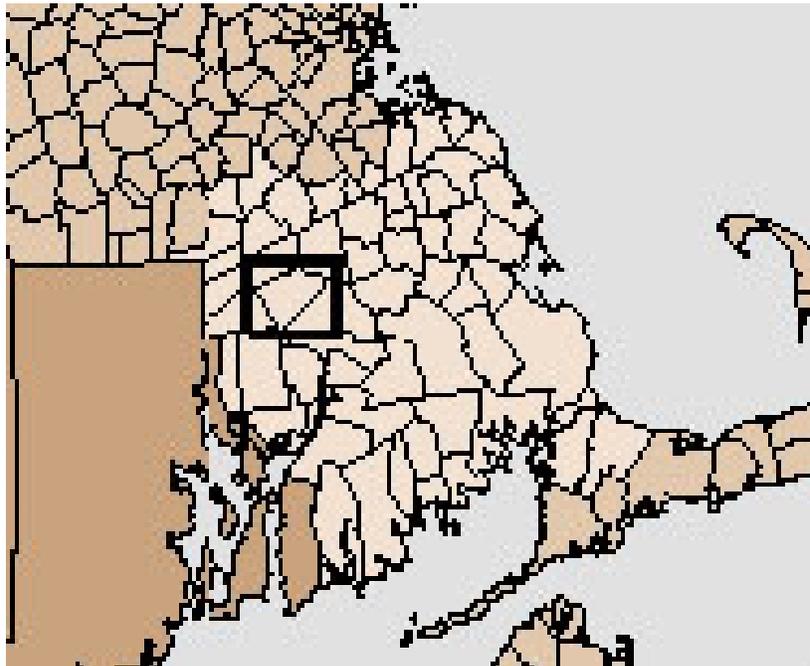
The Town of Norton, Bristol County, Massachusetts is located approximately 30 miles south of Boston and 18 miles north of Providence, RI. Norton has a land area of 29.0 square miles. Norton is easiest reached by the major transportation Routes 123, 140 and 495. The town has a rural character and suburban convenience. The town's population in 2010 was 19,031 people.

REGIONAL CONTEXT

The Town of Norton is located in southeastern Massachusetts within the Atlantic Coastal Plain. This inland community has five major rivers, large water bodies, many streams and extensive wetland areas (over 50% of the land mass) formed by glacial action over 10,000 years ago. Several square miles of floodplain, generally associated with the river systems, are also within the town. The Towns of Easton and Mansfield to the north, the City of Taunton to the east and southeast, the Town of Rehoboth to the south and southwest and the City of Attleboro to the west, border Norton.

Like its neighboring communities, Norton's land use has been, and continues to be, influenced by its proximity to Route 495. The placement of Route 495 through Norton has been a blessing as well as a curse. The highway has provided residents with easy access to neighboring communities, major cities, increased employment opportunities to other communities with shorter commutes, and increased commercial activities directly adjacent to the ramps. The highway has also brought an increase of traffic traveling in the center of town particularly because of the lack of a southbound exit to Route 140 from Route 495. Similarly, an increase in residential developments has occurred due to the high cost of housing and cost of land in and around Boston.

Town of Norton (outlined) in a regional context



Another major factor influencing land use in Norton is the availability of drinking water sources. The Canoe River Aquifer provides Norton as well as Sharon, Foxborough, Mansfield, and Easton with most of the available drinking water. The cooperation to protect this resource throughout all five towns has led to larger lot sizes within the watershed and restrictions on commercial/industrial uses. The Canoe River Aquifer had been designated by the U.S. EPA as a Sole Source Aquifer (for drinking water supply), and by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern, and is the main focus of the five town's open space and land protection efforts.

Norton shares, with Attleboro and Rehoboth, the Hemlock Swamp and islands. The Massachusetts Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program describes this large wetland area as an outstanding ecological community due to the geographical extent of upland islands scattered throughout an evergreen swamp. Over 150 acres of this swamp are under the protection the Norton Conservation Commission, the Land Preservation Society of Norton, and the Attleboro Conservation Commission. The areas abutting the swamp are under pressure of residential development in all three communities.

The Great Woods sections of Norton and Mansfield have been regional hot spots for nearly two centuries. The forestry resources of the Great Woods have provided Massachusetts with the mast for the U.S.S. Constitution. Located within the former portions of the Great Woods are the Xfinity Center and the Tournament Players Club (TPC) golf course. The Xfinity Center (formerly the Tweeter Center and Great Woods Center for the Performing Arts) in Mansfield provides recreational and cultural opportunities for the region, while the TPC golf course hosts major Pro Golf Association events.

Although the majority of the “woods” within the Great Woods had been converted to recent commercial development, large portions of the Great Woods remain due to the conservation efforts of both communities. The Norton Historical Society, Norton Conservation Commission, Land Preservation Society of Norton, and the Mansfield Natural Resources Trust own trails and a wildlife habitat corridor.



Items in *italics* are included in the Glossary found in Section 12.

HISTORY OF THE COMMUNITY *contributed by Ruth Gould, George Yelle and*

Christopher Cox

The area that in 1711 became the Town of Norton came partly from the tract purchased from Plymouth County in 1637 by the founders of Taunton and surveyed in 1640 by Myles Standish. The northern point of that tract is Cobbler's Corner, now in Mansfield, where the surveyors stopped to repair a shoe. The largest part, however, came from a portion of a second Taunton tract purchased in 1668, called the North Purchase. Originally, this included what are now Easton and Mansfield, but the former was set off as a separate town in 1725, the latter in 1775.

The first colonial settlement in Town was by William Wetherell in 1669. His house, located on the old Native American trail, and early colonial road called Bay Road, stood on the shore of Lake Winnecunnet near its outlet into the Snake River. Archaeological exploration before the building of Rt. 495 has indicated widespread Native American use of the area. A large formation of boulders near Lake Winnecunnet is said to have been the site of a lodge used by the Indian sachem Metacomet while hunting in the swamps and woods of what is now Norton. The rock formation was called King Philip's Cave. A skirmish between Native Americans and colonists occurred on Lockety Neck, the point of land at the junction of the Rumford and Wading rivers.

As early as the end of the seventeenth century, the Leonard family of Taunton, a branch of a family of skilled ironworkers, mined and forged bog iron in the Chartley section of Norton. Indeed, Chartley Pond was to have been the result of their excavating efforts. The grand Leonard house, a seventeenth century mansion, long the finest house in Town for over two centuries stood adjacent to the pond until, dilapidated, it was burned down by the Fire Department at the request of its owner.

In addition to working bog iron and farming, early Norton industries included gristmills and lumbering. The keel of the frigate "Constitution" is said to have been cut from oak trees found within the Norton Great Woods. In the nineteenth century, textile mills, bleacheries, a wool-combing mill, home and factory manufacturing of straw hats, basket-making, jewelry manufacturing, and producing boxes for the jewelry trade flourished. On Taunton Avenue, a plant stamped out the copper disks from which the old-style large copper pennies were minted.



Photograph of Norton Center School 1902, courtesy of Christopher Cox

The Town of Norton once boasted five railroad stations—East Norton, Chartley, Barrowsville, Crane Street, and Meadowbrook. Over one of Norton’s railroad lines used to speed the boat trains, bringing passengers from the grand Fall River Line steamships in Fall River. To the City of Boston. On the other line, luxury expresses from New York sped down to Cape Cod. Despite all of this activity around the edges, no train station was ever built in Norton Center, thus preventing it from ever becoming an industrial or commercial center. Judge Wheaton, then a mighty power in State and local politics, did not want smoky trains puffing by his splendid Main Street mansion. He endowed the Wheaton Female Seminary, which his daughter-in-law, Eliza Bayliss Wheaton, for over sixty-years, capably and lovingly developed into a well-known school. In 1912, the Seminary became Wheaton College. Until about seventy-five years ago, trolley lines connected Norton with Attleboro, Mansfield, and Taunton. Though never considered as outstanding as some of its neighboring cities, Norton was a lively and prosperous town

For the next several decades, Norton remained a relatively pastoral community, until the construction of Interstate Route 24 and later, Interstate Route 495. The highway construction attracted some industrial development, such as the Norton Commerce Center, and a substantial amount of residential development, particularly since the 1980s. Improved train service, with a station located in nearby Mansfield, has also helped to drive local development. Many new subdivisions were built throughout the town along with a good deal of infill development along existing roads. Residential land use has increased by over 50% since the 1980s, and the continued growth of Wheaton College and the entertainment/events venue, the Xfinity Center, have also helped to drive development.

In response to this increased development, Norton has worked hard, particularly in the past forty years, to inventory and protect its cultural, historical, and natural resources. Historic resource documentation includes over 280 survey forms, most written in the 1980s. The Land Preservation Society of Norton, and particularly, the Norton Conservation Commission, have individually, and through partnerships, pursued the purchase and set-aside of thousands of acres of valuable open land in Norton. Today, despite the continuing residential and industrial development in town, Norton has permanently protected 24% of its total acreage (2017).

Resources on the history of the community:

History of the Town Of Norton Bristol County, Massachusetts 1669-1859. George Faber Clark, Boston: Crosby, Nichols, and Company, George Clark 1859

Norton Historical Society, 18 West Main St, Norton MA. www.nortonma.org

Norton Historical Commission, 70 East Main St, Norton MA 0276

Norton Master Plan, Daylor Consulting Group, Inc., 1998.

Reconnaissance Report: Norton, MA Department of Conservation and Recreation, 2001.