



ACTON HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION
DESIGN GUIDELINES

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this set of guidelines is to offer the property owner assistance in preserving both the essential features of their individual properties and the character of the historic district in which they are located. It is not the intent of this document however, to dictate a universal standard for appropriateness, nor or these guidelines intended to regulate the



use of a property. While each of Acton's three districts possess characteristics unique to their context, as each property within them has its own individual personality, there are shared attributes that can be identified which give the district its cohesive sense of place in time. The Historic District Commission in defining these guidelines, acknowledges that there may be, on occasion, circumstances that override these guidelines and will therefore consider each proposed alteration on both its own merits as well as for its impact on the larger context of the district. Similarly, the Commission acknowledges that there are institutional structures within the districts which by virtue of their scale and public significance may necessarily depart from some aspects of these guidelines and will therefore be accorded greater consideration.

In 1990 the town voted to establish historic districts at Town Meeting under Massachusetts General Law Chapter 40.C for the purpose of preserving for future generations the fragile historic character still remaining in South Acton, West Acton and Acton Center. Rapid development in recent decades had threatened the integrity of the historic fabric in these districts and hence the Historic District Commission was established to regulate construction and alterations within these districts. The Commission recognizes the need for a set of design guidelines not only to assist property owners within the districts, but also to create a consistent set of standards which would guide future commission members.

For over twenty years the reference standard that has guided preservation within this country is the Secretary of Interior's, *Standards for Rehabilitation*. This document has proven effective in practice and forms the foundation upon which the design criteria adopted by the Acton HDC stands. A copy of our design criteria which summarizes these standards is attached.

In the following sections we review the most common structures and

altered architectural features and have provided guidance which supports the purpose of the Acton Historic District bylaw and the objectives of the Commission which enforces it. Prospective applicants who adhere to these guidelines greatly enhance the likelihood of gaining approval in the form of a Certificate of Appropriateness. Please refer to the application form, instruction, and bylaws of the Acton Historic District Commission for further information and documentation requirements for the application.

NEW STRUCTURES

NEW CONSTRUCTION



The density of development within the three Historic Districts does not allow much opportunity for new construction, but where feasible it must be considered with particular sensitivity to the character of the surrounding area. Clearly the three most critical factors to consider are the location, scale and massing of the proposed project. The scale and location will be dictated in part by the Town of Acton's Zoning Bylaw which should be referenced carefully before proceeding with design. On occasion, the Historic District Commission may impose setback and height requirements which may be more restrictive than that found in the Zoning Bylaw if the context of the abutting structures suggests that the appropriate response may differ from the broader mandate. Specifically, the front yard setback of neighboring structures should be maintained to preserve the "street wall" that is already in existence. Setting a structure back too far can be as destructive to the streetscape as one set too close. Side yard setbacks are not as critical to maintain, therefore the Zoning Bylaw will typically prevail.

The scale of the structure should be appropriate to neighboring structures, which with notable exceptions are largely one and two story single family residences. Several factors contribute to scale: the height of the structure; the size of window and door openings; the presence of decorative trim or other architectural elements such as porches, bays, etc.; and the size of the buildings footprint. Massing specifically refers to the form of the structure and the manner in which it is articulated into primary and secondary forms such as wings, ells, garages or barns: each with its own distinctive but related form. Careful use of massing can reduce the apparent scale of a large structure for instance by articulating it into a

composition of manageable pieces. With these concepts in mind, the owner is advised to consider the scale of neighboring structures and to relate to them on each of these levels as much as possible. Further, the applicant is advised to review the other relevant sections of these guidelines for specific information related to the features of the structure (ie: windows, doors, siding, roofs, etc.).

The Commission does not suggest that new construction reproduce that which is found in the original historic structures within the districts, but rather that new construction not detract from the character of the place that they collectively create. New construction should reflect the era of its birth, as the older structures do theirs, while maintaining a sensitivity to the scale, proportioning, and materials of these “respected elders”. Indeed, false reproductions of architectural styles not common to our era or location diminishes the value of authentic examples within the districts. A survey of the districts reveals that successive generations of Actonians developed our community with a variety of styles, from Colonial to Victorian and Colonial Revival, each contemporary to its time and, yet all remarkably compatible. Not until the second half of the 20th century did this evolutionary discourse begin to break down into a discordant dialogue. The appropriate response to this, however, is not the reproduction of the past but instead a sensitive approach to new construction which adheres to the principles of the past without mimicking the architectural styles that belong to it.

ADDITIONS

When approaching the addition to an existing structure within the district, the size of the addition relative to the original is a significant factor in determining the appropriate design.

An addition notably smaller than the original structure should be designed, in most cases, to continue the existing use of materials, trim, windows, roofing etc. (Please refer to the remainder of the guidelines for more specific information). The addition in this instance should be set-back from the front plane of the original, either to the side or to the rear if possible. In no case should this addition be taller than the original and typically should be lower in height, leaving the original massing of the structure apparent. While it would be appropriate to simplify the architectural details found in the original, its proportioning and character should be maintained in the addition’s design.

Larger additions, especially those that are significantly larger than the original structure require greater creativity in their design. It would be

most appropriate to setback a large addition from the main facade to preserve the massing of the original building. The materials and architectural expression of the addition should not overwhelm or diminish the original by reproducing it, and the massing of large additions should be articulated into forms of compatible scale and size to the original. As much as possible, the bulk of the addition should be screened from public view by utilizing landscaping and setbacks to the rear of the property. The materials, architectural detailing, proportioning and scale of openings should harmonize with but not necessarily match the original, establishing a clear delineation between “old” and “new” portions of the structure.

There will be occasions when additions are planned for existing structures which are themselves incongruous with the districts either because of the presence of an inappropriate style or material. In this case the Commission would encourage the prospective applicant to consider alteration of the original structure to make it more compatible with the district while adding to its size. The presence of an incompatible structure should not be construed as a license to increase its incompatibility, but rather as an opportunity to improve it.

OUTBUILDINGS



Because many of the original homes in the districts also functioned as working farms they had outbuildings associated with them; barns, carriage houses, garages and storage sheds were constructed to accommodate livestock and related equipment. Many of these early structures still exist and offer guidance in the design of their modern counterparts. Except for very large lots, the most appropriate location for a free standing outbuilding is well to the rear of the original structure, screened as much as possible from the public way. The scale of the structure, other than a barn, should be kept significantly smaller than the principal structure on the site and simpler with regard to massing and detail. The style, form, and use of materials can be the same as the original structure on the site, but it is equally appropriate and not uncommon for an outbuilding to take on a more rustic, utilitarian appearance. This is especially true with regard to the siding and trim, which may be more humble and understated than that found on the main structure. More contemporary structures, such as prefabricated storage sheds, pool equipment sheds and above ground pools are all within the jurisdiction of the Commission and will be considered in the same manner as all other outbuildings. In any case, the owner should refer to the section for new construction and other relevant sections that may apply.

ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES

DORMERS/SKYLIGHTS



With a few exceptions such as some Queen Anne and early 20th century bungalows scattered throughout Acton, dormers are not a common feature of the prevalent historic architectural styles found within the districts. When added to an existing structure therefore, dormers should, if possible, be kept on the rear portion of the roof. If placed in a visible location on a new or existing structure, dormers should be scaled appropriately to the house with a either a gabled, hipped or shed roof configuration whichever is most suitable for its size and architectural style.

Multiple small dormers are generally preferred to large single ones. Windows used in dormers should conform to the guidelines for windows and if possible match the size and configuration of existing ones.

Windows in dormers appear most pleasing when aligned vertically with existing windows on the wall below. Roofing and siding materials, as well as the trim details, should also match that of the existing structure.

Skylights by their very nature are not appropriate to historic structure, as they were not used until relatively recently except on large scaled institutional structures. Therefore, if used, they should be restricted only to those portions of the roof not visible from the public way. In a visible location, care should be taken in placement and scale, with preference given to flat low profile units with dark painted frames which blend with the roof color.

DOORS



Original doors should be maintained when possible but if replaced should be made of wood rather than metal. This is consistent with overall preference for natural materials. Wood doors should be constructed in a manner consistent with their traditional manufacture: assembled of stiles and rails, with an infill of wood panels and/or glass lites. In most pre 20th century structures large sections of glass should be further divided with muntins into lites to maintain a scale consistent with the windows on the structure. Flush doors (without stiles and rails) are conspicuously modern and should be avoided. If the addition of a storm or screen door is desired, a commercially available wood unit is preferred. Door hardware should be selected to compliment the door design and be appropriate to the period of the building. Stainless steel hardware or modern pulls detract from the harmonious appearance of the door and should be avoided if possible. Storm and screen doors are excluded from the Commission's jurisdiction, however, the owner should consider a

design which divides them into multiple panels not unlike the doors behind them.

DEMOLITION

Demolition of any structure or portion thereof within the historic districts requires the approval of the Historic District Commission, except when ordered by the Building Commissioner or other safety officer for reasons of public health and safety. Demolition is generally discouraged unless the structure is so deteriorated that rehabilitation is not practical or the structure is of no historic value to the district. In the former instance the Commission may require that a new structure replicating the original be built in the place of the demolished structure if its value is significant to the district.

In general renovation and/or replacement in kind is preferred to the demolition of all or a portion of a historic structure. Likewise, decorative architectural elements on the structure such as trim, brackets bays and porch columns should not be removed without Commission approval. Preference will be given to replacement in kind.

If a historic structure's location interferes with the owner's plans for the property, relocation to an appropriate site will be considered and is preferred to demolition.

GUTTERS

Gutters constructed of wood, seamless painted aluminum or other metal will be approved if their scale, contour, and detail are found to be compatible with the style of the building. Attachments should be concealed, therefore, visible hanging straps or brackets should not be used. Installation should not involve the removal of any historic detailing such as cornice moldings, brackets, etc. Gutters are inappropriate if constructed of short sections, visible brackets, heavy connectors and prominent end caps, all of which are incongruous with the appearance of the historic precedent.

LIGHTING

Acton's historic districts harken to a rural small town past where exterior lighting was all but nonexistent. While it is a modern reality and a necessity for traffic safety and security reasons, its use should be severely limited. When used, exterior lighting should be kept at low levels, discreetly designed to harmonize with the structure or landscaping and shielded to prevent glare or overspill of the light off the property. Illumination of building facades or large areas with flood lights is considered inappropriate. Fluorescent and sodium vapor fixtures give a harsh and unnatural light and are, therefore, incompatible with the dis-

tricts. The style and materials of light fixtures when visible from the public way should be appropriate to the historic character of the district. Otherwise, consideration should be given to concealing the lighting source with landscaping elements such as shrubbery. Illumination of signage is strictly regulated by the town's sign bylaw which should be referenced for additional information.

MASONRY



Masonry is found on a number commercial and institutional structures throughout the districts as well as on foundation walls or chimneys of the more numerous residential structures. The most typical masonry used in the districts is brick, while stone is more likely to be found on exposed foundation walls or in lintels and sills of brick structures. Concrete masonry units and glazed or extruded brick are not characteristic of the historic districts in Acton and should be avoided. The brick of preference is molded, consistently red in color, and is not blended or painted. Mortar should be raked and gray or red in coloration.

When repointing or rebuilding an existing chimney the owner should reuse the existing brick if possible or find a closely matching replacement. The chimney should be rebuilt to its original height and any corbeling or other decorative feature should be retained. Chimney caps are discouraged because they were not common historically, but if desired should be made of stone. (See the section on roofing for guidance on selecting the appropriate material for step flashing with the roof.)

If utilizing brick as a cladding material in new construction particular attention should be paid to its detailing to avoid the appearance of a thin non-loading bearing veneer. Wall openings should be kept narrow relative to their height and returns as deep as possible. Use of molded brick watertables, arches and stone lintels or other decorative elements further enhance masonry's natural attributes.

MODERN EQUIPMENT

Modern equipment such as satellite dishes, antennae, mechanical equipment, etc. are inherently inconsistent with the historic character of the districts and therefore should be screened or located so as not to be visible from the public way. While window air conditioning units are not within the Commission's jurisdiction permanently installed ground wall or roof top mechanical equipment are and therefore, should be located where otherwise not visible from the public way. Planting, fences or

rooftop enclosures are all appropriate screening devices that could be used when it is not possible to find such a location.

PAINT

Paint and stain colors are not within the jurisdiction of Acton's Historic District Commission. Paint however, may be specified by the Commission as a surface treatment to a feature or structure which would be otherwise inappropriate without a finish.

PORCHES



Porches can enhance a structure by humanizing its scale and by creating an open and welcoming gesture to the public. Many older structures in Acton have existing porches which should be maintained and, if necessary, repaired "in kind." Typically porches are located at the principal entry or offset to the ell (ie a farmer's porch) The porch should be integrated into the architecture of the house, remaining sensitive to its important architectural features. Porches should be supported by well proportioned wood columns or posts, typically square in section, or turned if appropriate to the style of the structure, and dressed with trim at the base and top. The spacing between posts and columns requires particular attention, generally never more than 1-1/2 times the height of the column. The columns should support and be connected together by a continuous beam trimmed with painted wood in a design compatible to the fascia of the main structure. The porch roof design and materials should mirror that of the main structure; shed, hipped and occasionally gabled roofs being the most common in the districts.

In the case of an historic structure, if a railing is required it should match any that may exist. In general, railings should run column to column on the same centerline and be comprised of a painted wood top and bottom rail with square, round or turned painted wood balusters set between as required by code. The same design should be continued onto any abutting stair, and a newel post with decorative wood cap should be located at every corner or termination that does not otherwise occur at a column. If an opening exists between the porch and grade it should be filled with masonry, painted wood siding, or lattice set within a painted wood frame panelized to mirror the column spacing of the porch above. Decking for the porch should in most cases be wood, and stairs should have treads to match with closed risers. In some instances stone steps with wrought iron rails are appropriate, but cast concrete steps are discouraged.

Porches on the street side of structures within the district should not be

enclosed with screening or glass, as to do so dramatically alters their light and delicate appearance. Seasonal installation of screen panels set behind the porch column and rails may be considered if no other option is available that is beyond the view of the public way.

ROOFS



While most roofs were originally constructed of wood shingles or slate the vast majority have since been replaced with asphalt shingles. Because of the expense of the original materials this will continue to be an allowable practice, but especially where existing slate roofs are present every effort should be made to preserve and repair the existing rather than considering replacement. Existing roof trim (ie. cornice trim, fascias and rakeboards) should be maintained or replaced in kind. Painted aluminum drip edges are permitted but cedar starter courses are preferred. Roof ventilation with a continuous low profile ridge vent extended fully to the ends of the roof are recommended over box ventilators. Similarly, continuous painted soffit vents are preferred to a series of individual vents. Copper, lead, or painted aluminum flashing are preferred over those with a bright or mill finish.

In new construction roofs should harmonize with the older roofs in the district in both slope and material. Asphalt shingles are common, and while not discouraged, should be dark and uniform in color. Flat roofs are rare in the districts, and hence discouraged on residential structures. They are a modern feature more common to commercial or institutional structures found in West Acton Village for instance. The most appropriate residential roof designs are gabled, hipped or in some later instances mansarded or gambreled. The roof slope should be kept uniform on all portions of the structure; the height and orientation of the roof should reflect the hierarchy of the structure covered, ie. ells should have a lower roof than the main body of the house. Examination of historic properties within the districts reveals that residences from the 18th and early 19th centuries featured gabled roofs typically oriented with the ridge running parallel with the street that it fronts. Mid and later 19th century building designs more commonly featured gabled roofs with the gable end presented to the street, and wings or ells with gabled roofs oriented ninety degrees to the main portion.

SHUTTERS AND AWNINGS

Although little more than an embellishment to windows today rather than a functional device existing shutters, never-the-less, should be maintained or replaced in kind. Many older structures were not furnished originally with shutters and new ones should not be installed in their absence, unless appropriate to the period of the building. When new or replacement shutters are required, wood louvered, or if appropriate, paneled shutters installed on shutter hinges with retaining "dogs"



lag bolted to the exterior wall are preferred. The size of the shutter should be equal to the height of the window opening and one half its width, with the blades sloping up and outward from the bottom. Shutters of synthetic materials, or those attached flat against the wall, are not

acceptable. Awnings can be an enhancement to a commercial storefront if designed in manner consistent with the style of the architecture. Historically, awnings were constructed of fabric, bracketed from the wall of the structure with a shed profile, and frequently retractable. All of those attributes would be considered appropriate in a contemporary design. Radiused and domed awnings are discouraged, as are awnings made of metal or any coated fabrics with a glossy sheen. The size and placement of the awning should be carefully considered so as to not obscure important architectural features or overwhelm the scale of the structure.

SIDING

With few exceptions the predominant material for siding in all three districts is painted wood clapboard. Notable exceptions are the brick firestations in South and West Acton villages, the brick commercial



structures in West Acton village, and the stucco firestation and brick library in Acton Center. (Please refer to the section for masonry for guidelines pertaining to its usage)

Accordingly, the commission strongly urges the use of natural siding materials which, in the case of most residential structures, is wood clapboards. Other acceptable wood siding alternatives that would be appropriate dependent on the context would be wood shingles, board and batten, shiplap or tongue and groove siding. Properly maintained wood siding

will provide excellent service in this climate for many decades. Synthetic siding, such as vinyl or aluminum, is strongly discouraged due to its incongruous detailing and appearance. The only instance in which its use is likely to be considered is in the case of an addition to a structure presently clad in the material.

TRIM



Painted wood trim is found on nearly all historic structures within the districts and its continued use is strongly encouraged. Synthetic materials are discouraged. Exterior trim, eg: corner boards, door & window casing, fascia & soffit trim, rake boards, porch columns, etc. provide essential architectural detail that both scales the exterior and identifies its style. Property owners considering rehabilitation or renovation should preserve existing trim if possible, and replace it in kind if necessary. In the case of additions and new construction, careful attention should be placed on neighboring historic structures in the vicinity to determine the appropriate application and proportioning of trim. In these instances greater latitude in determining the amount and type of trim will be considered, allowing for simplification or accommodation to commercially available stock. The installation of architectural elements that confuse or falsify the date of a building should be avoided.

WINDOWS



Recent improvements in building technology have yielded products that are significantly more energy efficient than those originally installed in Acton's buildings during the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Consequently, many owners will be tempted to consider replacement. Windows are one of the the most important architectural features on the exterior of a structure, critical in establishing the scale and rhythm of the facade. Therefore, wherever possible, the following guidelines should be observed: Wood windows are preferred over vinyl or aluminum. Retrofitting the original window sashes with weatherstripping and/or insulated glass is encouraged. If not possible, replacement sashes and hardware within the original frames is preferred. If total replacement is necessary, owners should maintain the original window size, location, material, trim and type of window. The most common window type within the districts are doublehung units with true divided lites, and are therefore, preferred to the more modern awning or casement types. The number of lites within a window should be consistent with the original units if present. Typically they are 6/6 or 2/2, rarely numbering less than two per sash in older structures. Applied muntins on the exterior surface of the glass are acceptable, but not inside or within the insulating unit unless truly divided or accompanied with an applied exterior muntin. In new construction or additions the size, proportion, type and rhythm of windows should conform to those nearby in the district and appropriate to the style of construction. Greater license can be taken with windows located on walls not visible from the public way. Storm windows are excluded form the jurisdiction of the Historic District Commission.

SITE FEATURES

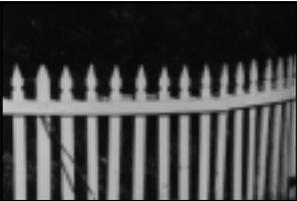
DECKS, TERRACES, AND LANDSCAPING



Acton’s Historic District Bylaw limits the jurisdiction of the Commission to site features such as fences, walls, gazebos, decks, raised terraces, permanent play structures and septic vent pipes. Therefore, the Commission has no policy regarding plantings and structures located at grade level such as walkways, although on occasion the use of plantings for the purpose of screening parking, lighting or other structures may be prescribed. (The Commission would recommend that landscaping to the street side of the property be kept consistent with Acton’s rural New England heritage which is generally understated and low in height. Tall hedges and shrubs should be kept to the rear of the lot and not allowed to overgrow the structure or interrupt the public vista along the street.)

Decks and raised terraces are typically concealed from public view as they should be. Decks are a modern contrivance that can be difficult to integrate into the existing structure. If visible from the public way, decks on historic structures should be constructed of wood with painted railings, posts and balusters consistent with the style of the structure and/or to match original features of similar type if present. Elevated decks should be furnished with a lattice skirt or other architectural device to visually anchor them to the ground and to integrate them as much as possible with the existing structure. Raised terraces should have stone or stone clad retaining walls constructed in a manner consistent with the section on Fences and Walls. Concrete and treated wood timbers are generally not appropriate materials for a visible retaining wall.

FENCES AND WALLS



Due in part to larger lots and typically generous setbacks from the street, fences and walls are not a common feature in Acton. Where they do occur however, they tend to be located along side and rear lotlines. Variations of low wood picket style fences or drystack stone walls are most common, the later more typically found at the periphery of the districts. If installing a fence, consideration should be given to the material and style of those in the immediate area. Owners should align their fence with those on abutting properties or match the setback and height of those nearby.

Tall wood privacy fences such as stockade fences should be restricted to

the rear of the property, never closer to the street than the front of the house, otherwise they obscure the architecture of the residence and detract from the streetscape. Fences constructed of chainlink, metal wire, plastic or other synthetic materials should be avoided in any location where the fence would be visible from the public way as they are incompatible with the character of the districts.



Stone walls should be constructed of dry stacked native stones small enough to be lifted by an individual, and to a height of no more than three feet in most cases. The use of mortar and cut stone is generally not appropriate to the rustic character of the stone walls typically found in the districts. (An exception would be a stone retaining wall requiring greater height and/or deeply raked mortar joints)

Owners should refer both to existing wood fences and stone walls in the district, and the architectural style of their own property when considering the style of fence and degree of ornamentation that would be appropriate. Particular attention should be paid to wall terminations, gates, and openings that are created as they represent important opportunities to break the rhythm of the fence or wall by introducing ornamentation. Please refer to the Town's Zoning Bylaw for additional regulations regarding the height and location of fences and walls.

PARKING

The need for parking is a modern necessity and in the case of commercial and institutional structures, may have to take the form of parking areas with the capacity to hold a great number of automobiles. If not designed in a sensitive manner, however, parking areas can have a deleterious impact on their surroundings. Large expanses of paving and their attendant number of automobiles are inconsistent with the character of a historic district. The Commission, therefore, strongly encourages the placement of parking areas behind rather than in front of structures. An example is found at Town Hall. If circumstances will not allow such a placement, landscaping such as plantings and/or fencing should be employed for the purpose of screening the cars and pavement from public view as much as possible. Due to small front yard setbacks, on-street parking will continue to exist in the commercial portion of West Acton Village; but is discouraged elsewhere, especially within the Town Center where it would detract considerably from the character of the town's most precious physical asset, a "green" town common.

Residential driveways and their use to park automobiles for their residents and guests is not within the jurisdiction of the Historic District Commission. Owner's should reference the town's Zoning Bylaw for further design criteria regarding parking areas and driveways.

PLAY STRUCTURES

The Commission has jurisdiction over permanent play structures. If possible, permanent play structures should be kept to the rear of the property and screened by existing structures and/or landscaping. The scale of the structure should not overwhelm the site, and natural materials such as wood are preferred. Muted earthtones are recommended for painted structures and awnings.

SEPTIC SYSTEMS

While health and safety regulations take precedent with regard to septic systems, the HDC does review the placement and design of vent pipes and other associated above ground structures. The Commission may request screening for walled or mounded systems which significantly disturb the existing terrain visible from the public way. Septic vent pipes should be placed in a remote location as far as possible from the public way and screened with vegetation, or other device. Dark-colored, short “stove pipe” type vents are preferred to the white PVC gooseneck type.

SIGNAGE

Property owners proposing a sign of any type should consult Section 7 of the Acton Zoning Bylaw which details the requirements that must be met to obtain a sign permit. Signs within the historic districts also



require approval from the Historic District Commission, who may in certain instances either grant a special exception to town requirements or apply additional restrictions. As a rule however, signs must be constructed of wood, kept small and simple in their design and not internally illuminated. Wall mounted or post mounted signs will be considered if appropriately sited and/or placed with regard to the building’s exterior. Neon or aggressive colors and/or logos detract from the historic character of the district and are, therefore, regarded as inappropriate. External lighting should be concealed from view if possible with planting or similar devices, and carefully controlled to illuminate only the surface of the sign with minimal brightness and glare. Signs whose design, method of support, and typeface style are based in historic precedent are preferred.

ACTON CENTRE HISTORIC DISTRICT



SOUTH ACTON HISTORIC DISTRICT



WEST ACTON HISTORIC DISTRICT

