

## Battle Road Farm:

### *A Progressive Town Initiative for Affordable Housing*

by *Randall Arendt*

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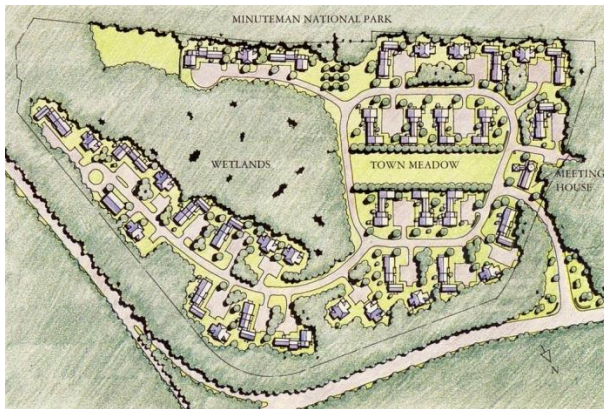
*Location:* Old Bedford Road, Lincoln, MA

*Date:* 1987-1991

*Architect:* William Rawn Associates, Boston, MA (for Phases 2 and 3: The Architectural Team, Boston, MA)

*Landscape Architect:* Michael Van Valkenberg Associates, Cambridge, MA (for Phases 2 and 3: William Fleming Associates, Stoneham, MA)

Bordered by the 750-acre Minuteman National Historical Park, this 24-acre rolling, wooded site was proactively acquired for affordable housing in 1986 by the town of Lincoln (population 6,362), in pursuit of its goal of ensuring that 10 percent of its housing stock be affordable, in line with state recommendations. This remarkable project, which contains 120 dwellings (48 of which meet affordability standards), has preserved 59 percent of its acreage as common open space, including meadows, wetlands, a Native American burial ground, and footpaths linked to the town's extensive trail network.



**Figure 20-10.1:** At Battle Road Farm dwellings are arranged in a semi-formal manner, respecting natural areas as well as framing the long rectangular central green which is planted with shade trees to help define this “outdoor room”. Photo by Randall Arendt, Site Plan by William Rawn Associates

Over the previous 15 years, four development proposals for the property had been put forward, none of which received zoning approval. Deciding that the best way to see good planning realized on the site was to buy it, Lincoln approved the \$3 million purchase price, with assurances that much of the public investment could be recouped while also preserving seven acres to serve as a buffer to the National Historical Park.



**Figure 20-10.2:** The rear elevations of these three gable-ended homes present a formal side to the central green, with back porches designed to resemble front porches. The other sides of these deep buildings extend back to the street to encompass additional dwellings in the New England “connected farmhouse” style. Stone walls (right) were relocated and rebuilt to maintain the rural character of this new hamlet setting. Source: Charles Tashima

Because no one in Lincoln wanted the units to look like they were subsidized, unusual care was taken to ensure that “both the dwellings and the site design possess so much character they manage to camouflage their tight budgets” (Langdon, 1991). In an unusual step, the town issued a “request for proposals” to the development community, asking for conceptual plans that officials would use to select a developer. In this way, the community retained control of the process to ensure that it would get the result it desired. Without that control, officials might have had to settle for unimaginative proposals consistent with basic ordinance requirements but not meeting municipal criteria for a traditional layout with buildings that would harmonize with the community.

After discussions with several teams of developers, architects, and landscape architects, Lincoln selected the Cottonwood Company and Keen Development Corp. to prepare a site plan meeting the town's general criteria. The long, connected New England farmhouse style was chosen as a model for economically massing four units into an historically familiar structure, with shrubs and trees typical of nineteenth-century farms (lilac, bridal wreath, crabapple) planted around them. The farmhouse consists of a formal building with its gable end facing the street, behind which are two smaller units, ending at the back with a large structure similar to a traditional barn. Two other designs, the two-family Carriage House and the Meadow House, provide variety of form, interior layout, and pricing options. All units meet the same high standards of design and workmanship, whether subsidized or market rate.

In addition, modest front setbacks were adopted (22 feet from columned porches to the street) not only to reflect traditional patterns but also to create conditions favorable to casual conversation between residents and neighbors walking by. Seven of these “farmhouses” also face onto a grassy meadow or “common,” located behind them, which functions as an informal outdoor space for neighborhood activities and recreation. Parking is accommodated in numerous small areas to avoid visual blight and long walking distances. Accessible by public transportation, the site is also connected to the town's extensive trail system. Sewage treatment is provided by an innovative tertiary system integrated with the wetlands, as the project lay beyond the town's sewerage network.

The 48 affordable units, comprising 40 percent of the project unit total, were reserved for first-time homebuyers who were eligible for below-market mortgage interest rates. Buyers were selected in a lottery, and half of the affordable units were reserved for past or present town residents or their relatives, town staff members, and employees of local nonprofit organizations in Lincoln. Part of the

mortgage subsidy was provided by revenues from the sale of eight acres the town had also bought at the same time, which were developed for a 120,000 SF office building. Another \$825,000 was provided by the Massachusetts Housing Partnership in the form of a Community Development Action Grant. Continuing affordability is ensured by the Lincoln Foundation, which created deed restrictions limiting income resale proceeds to the same proportion of the market value that the owner had originally paid. Homeowners are also eligible for loans from the Foundation to help pay for capital improvements. The fact that town officials took the initiative to make this project happen enabled the developer to focus on the important issues, such as building and site design, rather than on the political struggles usually associated with the review and approval process.

