



ATHOL

COMMUNITY BRANDING & WAYFINDING PROJECT

FINAL REPORT JUNE 2022

Prepared by Favermann Design

Prepared for the Department of Housing
and Community Development (DHCD)

MASSACHUSETTS
DOWNTOWN
INITIATIVE





Vintage Postcard

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

Located in North Central Massachusetts, Athol is a historic and contemporary mill town set in a rich natural recreational area in Worcester County. It has a population of approximately 12,000. The LS Starrett Company has been manufacturing precision tools there since 1881. As the town's largest employer, over two thousand Starrett employees continue to work at the company's manufacturing facilities today. The town's nickname "Tool Town" comes from this.

From the town center, Athol lies 23 miles east of Greenfield, 25 miles west of Fitchburg, 35 miles northwest of Worcester, and 67 miles west-northwest of Boston. Most of the population is settled around the downtown area, with the rest of the town being relatively sparsely populated.



Bird Watchers

The Town of Athol and North Quabbin region are quite blessed with a natural beauty and many recreational opportunities. Its lush, wooded areas and rivers encourage outdoor recreation including hiking, wildlife (especially bird watching) observation, fishing, swimming, and camping all within the borders of the town. The Millers River flows through the downtown towards the Connecticut River. And the Tully River flows into the Millers within town while many other streams cross the town. Parts of Tully Lake and Lake Rohunta lie within town, as does Lake Ellis and several other small ponds.

A large portion of the Millers River Wildlife Management Area lies within town, as does a small portion of Petersham State Forest. A major annual rowing event is the Athol-Orange River Rat Race, a wild water canoe celebration. Certain flora and fauna species are indigenous to this New England area including a bright red Dragonfly (*Crocothemis erythraea*), edible violets (*Viola adunca*) and a plethora of various birds.

Originally the town was called Pequoiag when it was a Native American settlement. Five families founded the first white set-



Athol-Orange River Rat Race

tlement here in 1735. It was incorporated as a township in 1762 under the name of Athol. The name is traditionally believed to mean "New Ireland" while others believe it to be of Scottish origin.

Initially, the British settlers subsisted on agriculture and hunting. Due to its accessible waterpower, by 1791 Athol became a mill town. The town had four gristmills, six sawmills, a fulling mill, and a shop with a trip hammer. Within the next twenty years, The Athol Cotton Factory was built. It was the first industry to serve markets beyond the local region.

All through the early 19th Century, textile, leather, wood, and metal industries further expanded the market for goods produced in Athol. The construction of the railroads had a significant impact on the Town of Athol. The Vermont and Massachusetts Railroad was built in the 1840s. It generated so much industrial growth that a second North-South line connecting Athol and Springfield was constructed in 1870. Construction of the Fitchburg Railroad, an east-west line, was extended through Athol in 1879, on its way to the Hoosac Tunnel and the Berkshires.



Starrett Tool Factory



Starrett Tape Measure

Following the Civil War, Athol's economy has been primarily industrial. Established in 1868, The Athol Machine Company manufactured a chopping machine that was invented by local resident Laroy S. Starrett. In 1881, Mr. Starrett established the L. S. Starrett Company, known for making quality precision tools. Over 140 years later, the company is still located and thriving in Athol.

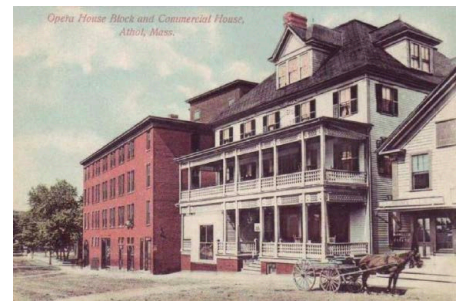
As industries developed along the river valley, homes and stores grew up around the common located on the hill southeast of the factories. This area today is called Uptown, and it was the location of the first bank in town. Running from Athol to the next Town of Orange, the first trolley lines were established in 1894. Additional lines soon provided efficient transportation to surrounding areas as well. Because of its development of industry, commerce, and transportation, Athol was the center of activity for the entire nearby region at the start of the 20th century.

In part due to large automotive manufacturers interference, during the 1930s, the trolley lines closed due to the increased use of private automobiles, bus service, and The Great Depression's difficult economic times. In 1938, when the four nearby Swift River Valley towns were flooded to create the Quabbin Reservoir, the Springfield railroad route was abandoned. Following this, Athol's growth leveled off as commerce became increasingly dependent on the Interstate Highway System. Population reached a peak of 12,186 in 1955.

However, when the Route 2 bypass of Athol was constructed in the 1950s, it further limited direct access to the downtown business district. The following years showed population decline, and by 1980, the town's population had declined to 10,634. This situation was exacerbated by the establishment of I-495 and the MassPike. This also had an effect on retail and food services that closed. However, over



1930's Image of Downtown Athol



19th Century Image of Former Opera House

the last couple of decades, Athol's population has gradually risen to its present number over 12,000.

In the early 1980s, the commonwealth of Massachusetts targeted the North Quabbin region's principal towns of Athol and Orange for funding to promote economic development, as during that time, the area had the highest unemployment rate in the state. Various measures were taken by the state to assist the commercial sector.

In the 1990s, WalMart opened between Athol and Orange. At that time, several Main Street businesses closed. Slowly, things started to rebound, however. In the 2010s, Athol welcomed Market Basket and many other businesses to town, including Marshall's and Pet Supply Plus. A former mill in town was converted to a grow facility for now legal marijuana.

In the 2020s, Athol has two dispensaries open for legal marijuana generating jobs and additional town revenue. The housing market has rebounded and now is in high demand. Many new food establishments opened, including a Pizza Hut and Los Agaves. Main Street is making a comeback with most store fronts now in use.

Interestingly, there is a long list of Athol-born individuals who were and are musicians. Included in this group are Dave Barger, musician, trombonist and tuba player for Blood, Sweat, and Tears, Philip Bezanson, composer and educator Shawn Patterson, composer and writer of the song "Everything Is Awesome," and Kenny Roberts, country music singer, champion yodeler.

As of 2022, groups working on Athol's economy include the Economic Development and Industrial Corporation and the North Quabbin Chamber of Commerce. The Town of Athol's volunteer Downtown Vitality Committee underscores these local economic issues and advocacy as well. Chaired by the Town Planner, this MDI Branding and Wayfinding grant was overseen by this committee.



Athol's Millers River Natural Areas



Athol Downtown

THE PROCESS

Eric Smith, the Town Planner, enlisted the assistance of the Athol's Downtown Vitality Committee (DVC) to work with the consultant, Favermann Design, to create the brand and initially apply it to strategic wayfinding and signage. The DVC is charged with the mission of revitalizing Athol's downtown area as an appealing and vivacious focal point for residents and visitors. It is comprised of a group of residents, business owners, and community leaders. DVC is focused on encompassing Athol's unique character by enhancing the image of downtown and helps to promote economic vitality, design, and organize downtown elements to achieve community goals and objectives.

Representing a range of backgrounds and additional membership on other Town of Athol appointed and volunteer committees and commissions, the Town of Athol's Downtown Vitality Committee is composed of the following members:



Town Hall

Diane DiPietro, **Clerk**
Ann Willhite, **Member**
Paula Robinson, **Member**
Shelley Small, **Associate**
David Small, **Associate**
Mary Holtorf, **Chair**
Steve Wills, **Member**
Morgan Woroner, **Member**
Alan D. Dodge, **Member**



Public Library

The first meeting was an introduction of the consultant and a presentation that explored a wide scope of branding elements and techniques. A month later, the second meeting included a visual presentation focused upon a series of case studies of other cities and towns. These various community and often very different outcomes were discussed and analyzed by the committee.

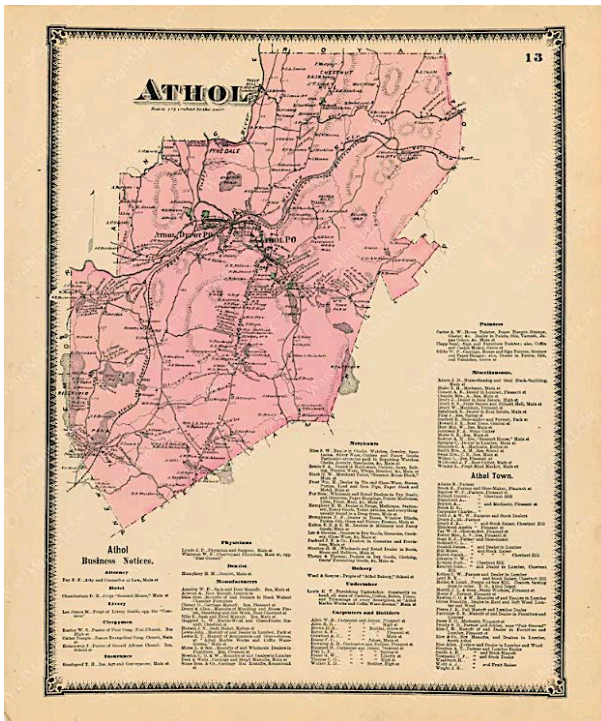
The third meeting was an Ideation Exercise, a word-association, pictorial keyword and descriptive phrase. This allowed each DVC to be heard and make critical contributions. The exercise asked for word and phrase descriptions as well as questions relating to

public art, street furniture and aspirational goals of the community. The DVC participants were extremely expressive, focused and excited about their task.

A clear theme developed from the first meeting onward: there was a strong push pull between the town being a traditional and current mill town and its rich natural resources.

A few examples of the depth and exuberance of the DVC members are the following results:

How would you describe Athol with one word?



Vintage Map of Athol

- | | |
|-------------|---------------|
| Active | Hopeful |
| Canoe | Kayak |
| Center | Local |
| Changing | Manufacturing |
| Collaborate | Musical |
| Complete | Natural |
| Diverse | Nature |
| Downtown | Neighborhood |
| Dragonfly | Potential |
| Earthy | Preserved |
| Ecotourism | Resilient |
| Evolving | River |
| Exciting | Rustic |
| Fun | Scientific |
| Green | Spiritual |
| Growth | Trails |
| Historic | |

How would you describe Athol with two words?

Note: This was voted on and prioritized to two top choices. One was historic and the other new--each seemed to work as slogans.

- | | |
|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Naturally Industrious | Moving Ahead |
| Tool Town | Natural Community |
| Aspire Athol | New Athol |
| Business Friendly | Recallinrated Future |
| Family Friendly | Recreation Area |
| History Trail | Religiously Diverse |
| Idiologically Diverse | |

What does Athol Aspire to?

List Future-Perfect goals?

- ASB Building mural on west side of building
- Balance Development and Preservation
- Co-pollination
- More Diverse Restaurants
- Don't Paint on brick building (not on all of it)
- Façade and Building Improvements
- Have Small Downtown Businesses Engaged, with Chamber involved with Downtown businesses
- Have businesses "supportive", "engaged" & "same hours"
- Improved Greenways
- Improved/update design guidelines
- Include Arts with the Development
- Modernization without losing character
- Better mixed use
- Murals-programming
- New form of Development as to not repeat Eastern MA mistakes
- No Vacant Storefronts
- Preserve and Enhance Downtown while preserving natural resources
- Preserve and promote more family owned businesses
- Shop/Buy Local
- Enhance the Town Common
- Visually Unified Downtown
- Vibrant Downtown (as an Economic Engine)

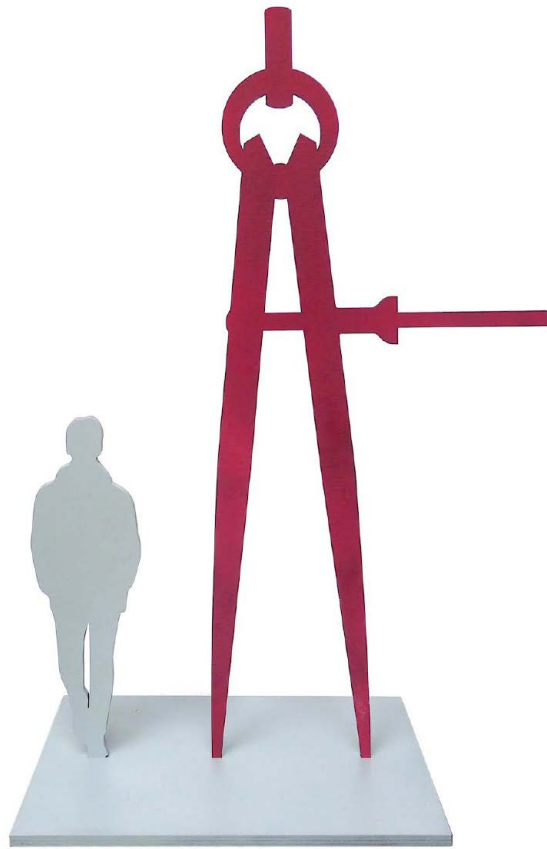


19th Century home in Athol

Q: Public Art as a focus? What do you think of public art as a potential focus?

Consensus answer from the Downtown Vitality Committee was a strong "Yes" to Public Art. It would add energy and interest to the Downtown.

1. Commented from DVC member Dave Small—he likes the art combination of industry with nature
2. A strong recommendation was made during the discussion about public art to explore ways to attach sculpture to light poles.
3. Several potential Artwing designs were created by the consultants.
4. As significant and somewhat unique approach to Athol's new wayfinding system could be a series of sculptural markers or "landmarks." These can be huge representations of the various tools made in Athol. These "markers" can be strategically placed along the roads leading to Athol's Downtown.



Sculptural Tool Markers to be set along entrance roads to Athol

Q: What about Street Furniture as artist enhanced or sculptural unique to Athol forms?

1. Thematic and unique to Athol street furniture as preferred by DVC.
2. Also, the idea of getting local craftspeople and artists to create sculptural street furniture was advocated.
3. Previous examples of this type of work have been exhibited at local festivals and fairs.
4. Another concept is to explore “workbenches” as starting points for street furniture forms.

Besides developing themes that could be translated by the consultants visually, another strategic task was to determine a catchphrase, slogan or tagline. Keeping in mind that another viable option and one often selected by some communities was not to have one at all, the committee members embraced the push-pull notion of Athol’s strong nature and industry influences and environment by choosing the phrase “Naturally Industrious.” This captures the essence of the town. The favored image of the colorful indigenous wood duck also speaks to the calm serene waterfowl on top of the water while working hard with its legs and feet underneath the surface—again nature and industry.

Taking all these things into consideration, the Favermann Design team created a number of wayfinding sign design options for the Downtown Advisory Committee to review, analyze, digest and suggest changes or refinements. Out of this process, several specific design details emerged. These included:

1. An exploration of a number of design themes including tools, downtown buildings, nature and recreation.
2. Consideration of how to integrate sculptural forms into the downtown setting.
3. The use of silhouettes of tools and recreational forms were explored.
4. They were applied for use as repeated images on lower sign bands.
5. Colors were additionally explored with green being a predominant choice.

Design schemes explored by the consultant included studies of Motif #1, lobsters, fishing shacks, row boats, views of the town from the sea and others. From these options, the Advisory Committee thoughtfully reviewed each concept and then voiced their likes and dislikes finally focusing on the preferred design.



Additional discussion by the Downtown Vitality Committee recommended that wayfinding elements be strategically placed at the following locations:

1. Entrances to the Town of Athol
2. To and at additional off-street parking locations
3. Decision points in and around the Downtown
4. Wayfinding elements will be strategically set to orient to nearby recreational areas
5. Where deemed appropriate, placement of historical or cultural markers

Another important exercise was performed by the Downtown Vitality Committee and Athol town staff was to create a wayfinding sign element placement map. This will be a “living document” that allows for change, refinement and expansion over time. Favermann Design will develop a set of specifications of the complete Family of Elements of the chosen design to allow for vendor bidding, fabrication, and installation. A set of wayfinding cost estimates was shared by the consultants with town staff to assist with bidding. The completed designs.

In most towns in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the members of Select Boards are street and sidewalk commissioners and must approve any significant changes to both roads and walkways. Following official approval, Favermann Design will develop a set of specifications of the complete Family of Elements of the chosen design to allow for vendor bidding, fabrication, and installation. A set of wayfinding element cost estimates was shared by the consultants with town staff to assist with bidding.

The Athol final branding and wayfinding design went through an iterative process with the Downtown Vitality Committee, the Town of Athol Select Board, and the consultants. After several meetings and an early group choice, upon reflection, the Downtown Vitality Committee reassessed the initial design of a wood duck design and wanted a totally different approach. The committee members were divided on two design directions. One was a downtown-oriented image approach designating important buildings; the other was utilizing a natural area image. Together, both designs visually described the Town of Athol. The two design options were scrutinized and discussed by the Town Manager with the Select Board members.

Viewing Athol’s downtown as an iconic “mill town” center spawned by river power and adjacent natural areas, the Select Board was very pleased with both design options and requested that Favermann Design creatively merge the two designs into one image. The resulting design was unanimously approved.

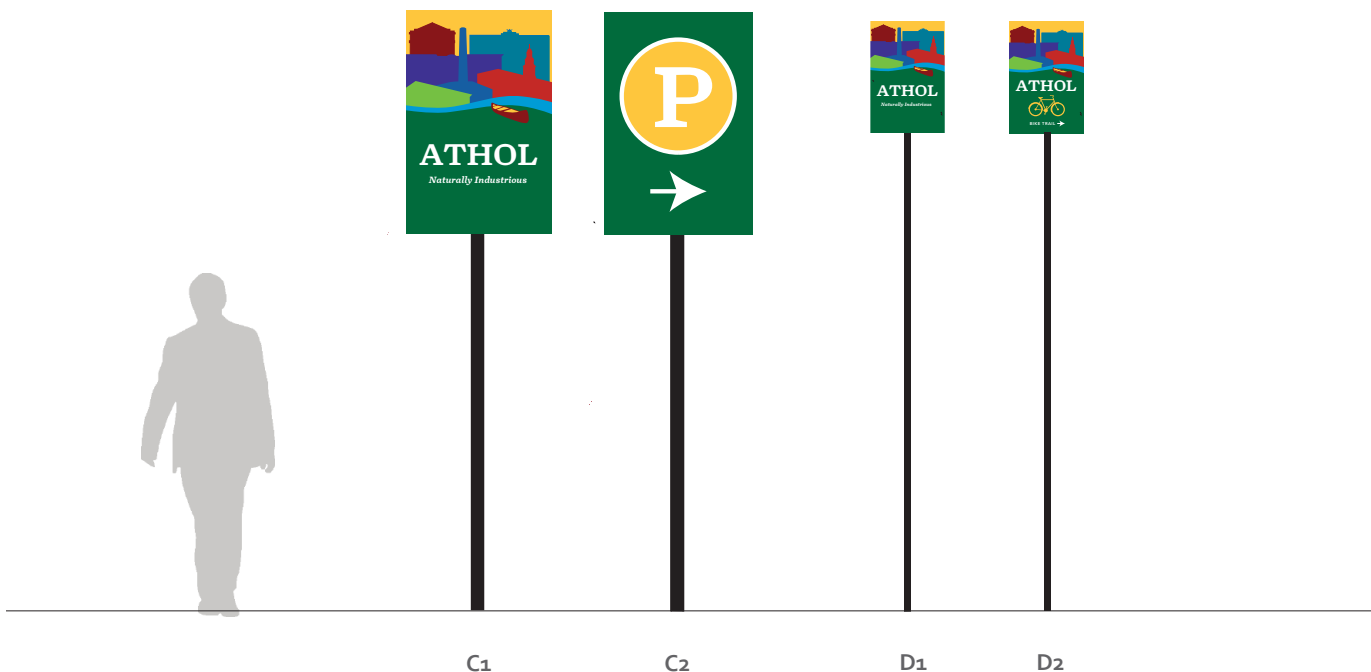
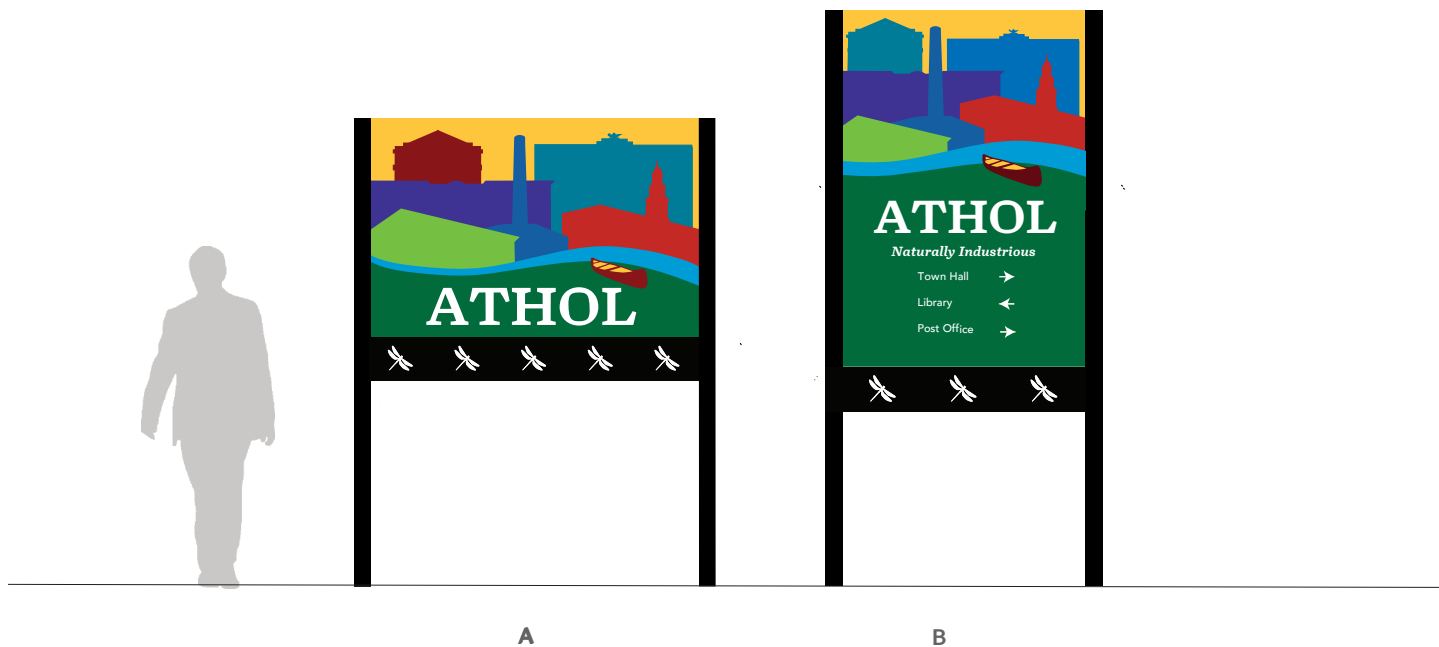


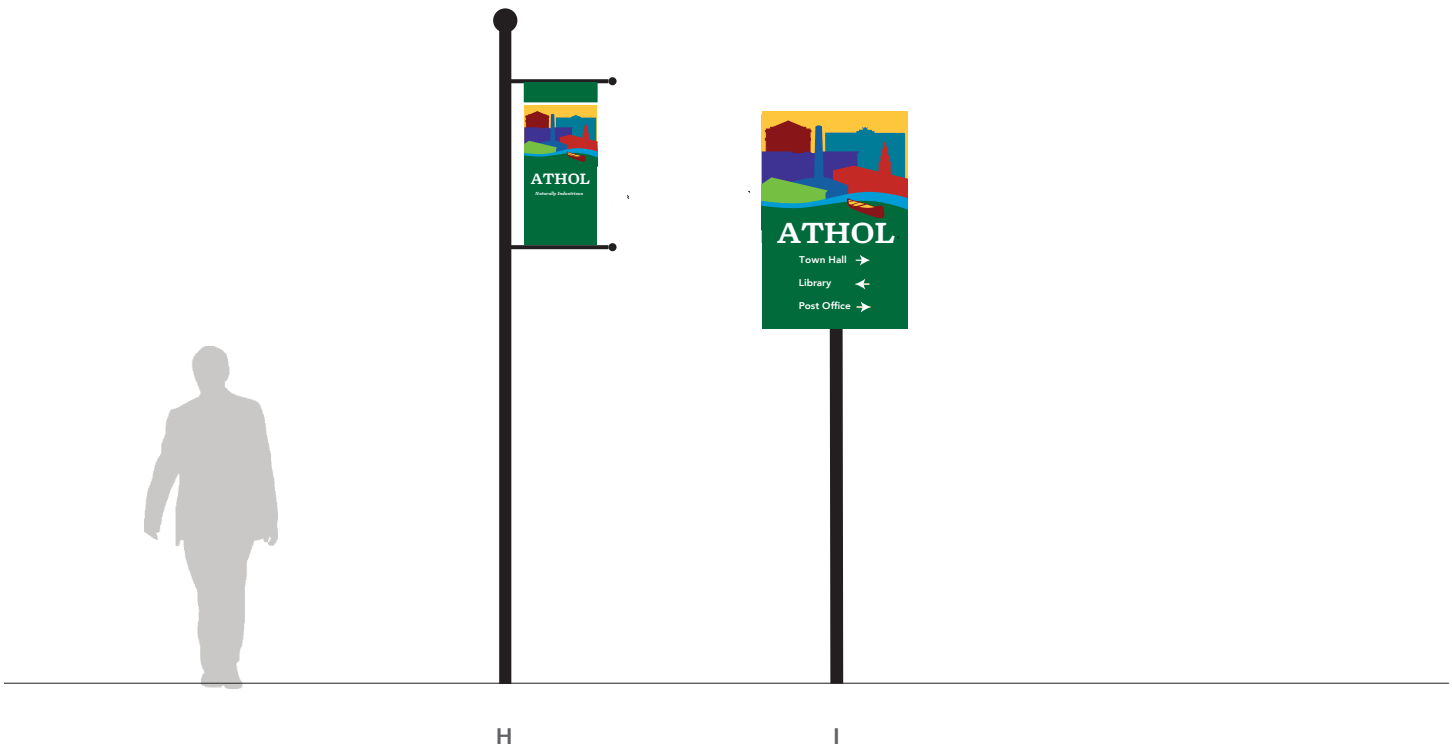
Indigenous Red Dragonfly
(*Sympetrum fonscolombii*)

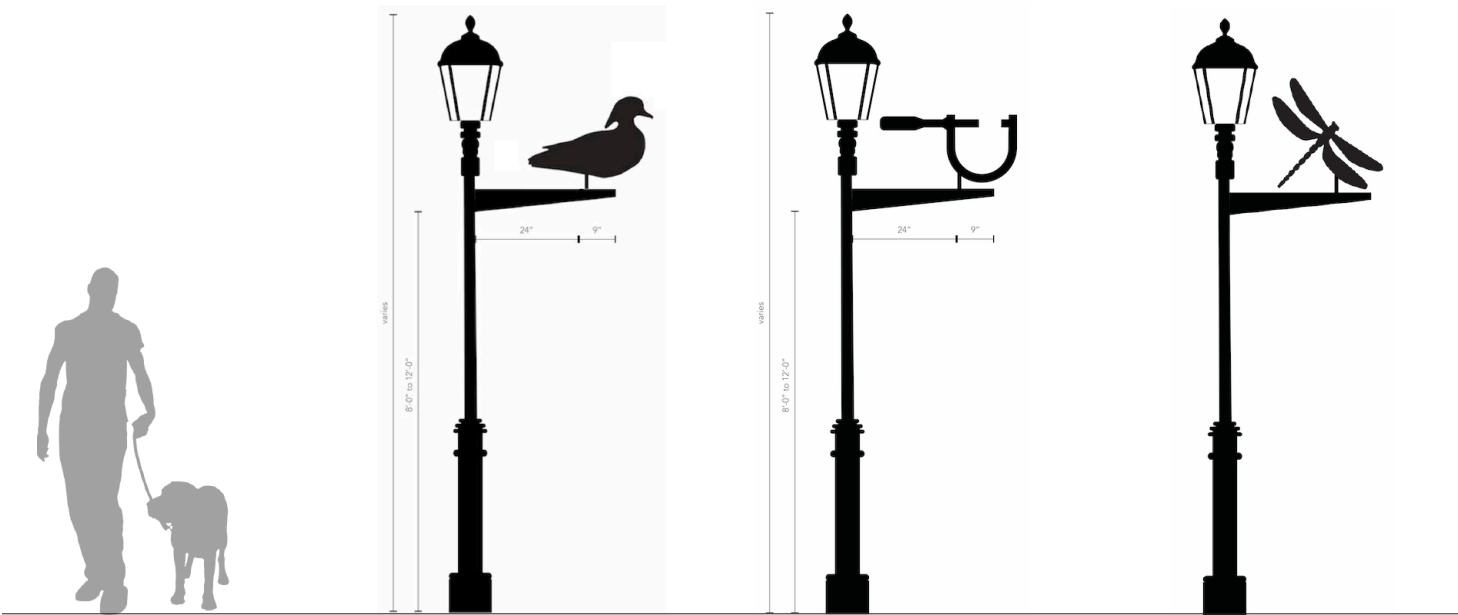
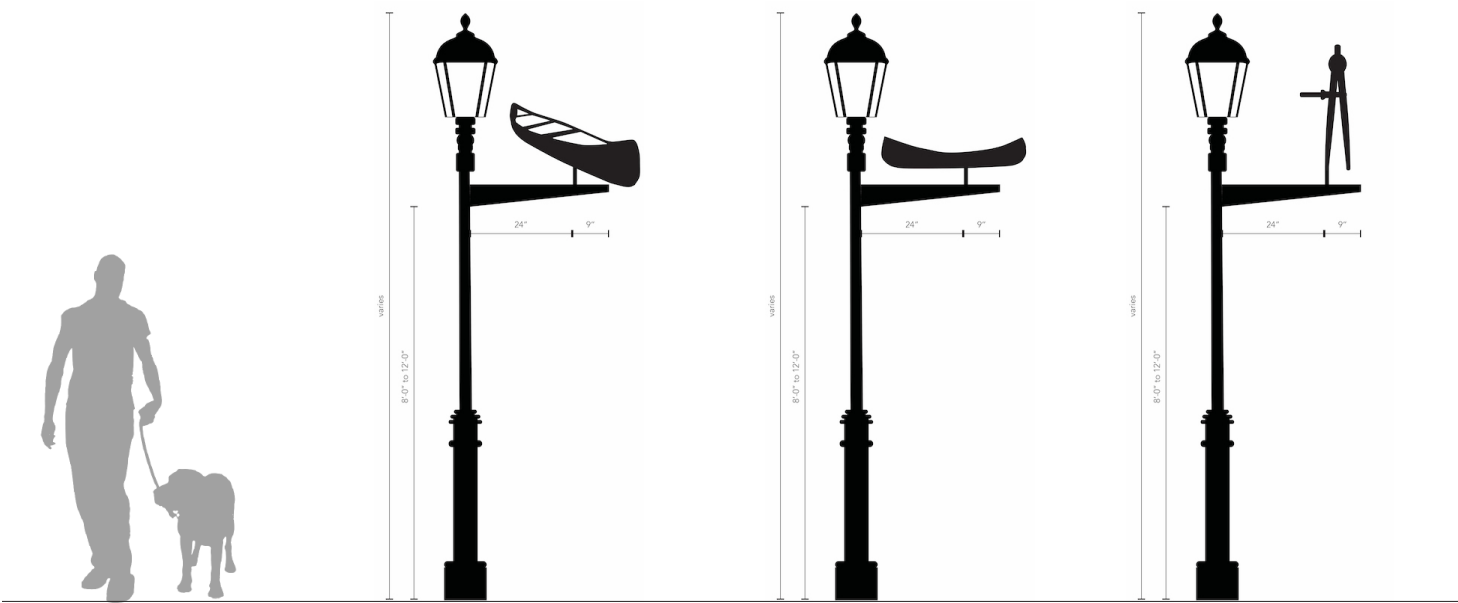
This design underscores how both industry and the river (underscored by canoes) capture the spirit of the downtown and the overall essence of the Town of Athol. Additionally, the tagline “Naturally Industrious” was well-received and will also be adopted and used appropriately by the Town of Athol. The Select Board was so pleased with both the thoughtful direction and creative design of this branding and wayfinding project that they plan to strategically fund and implement the wayfinding system as soon as possible.

ATHOL

FAMILY OF ELEMENTS





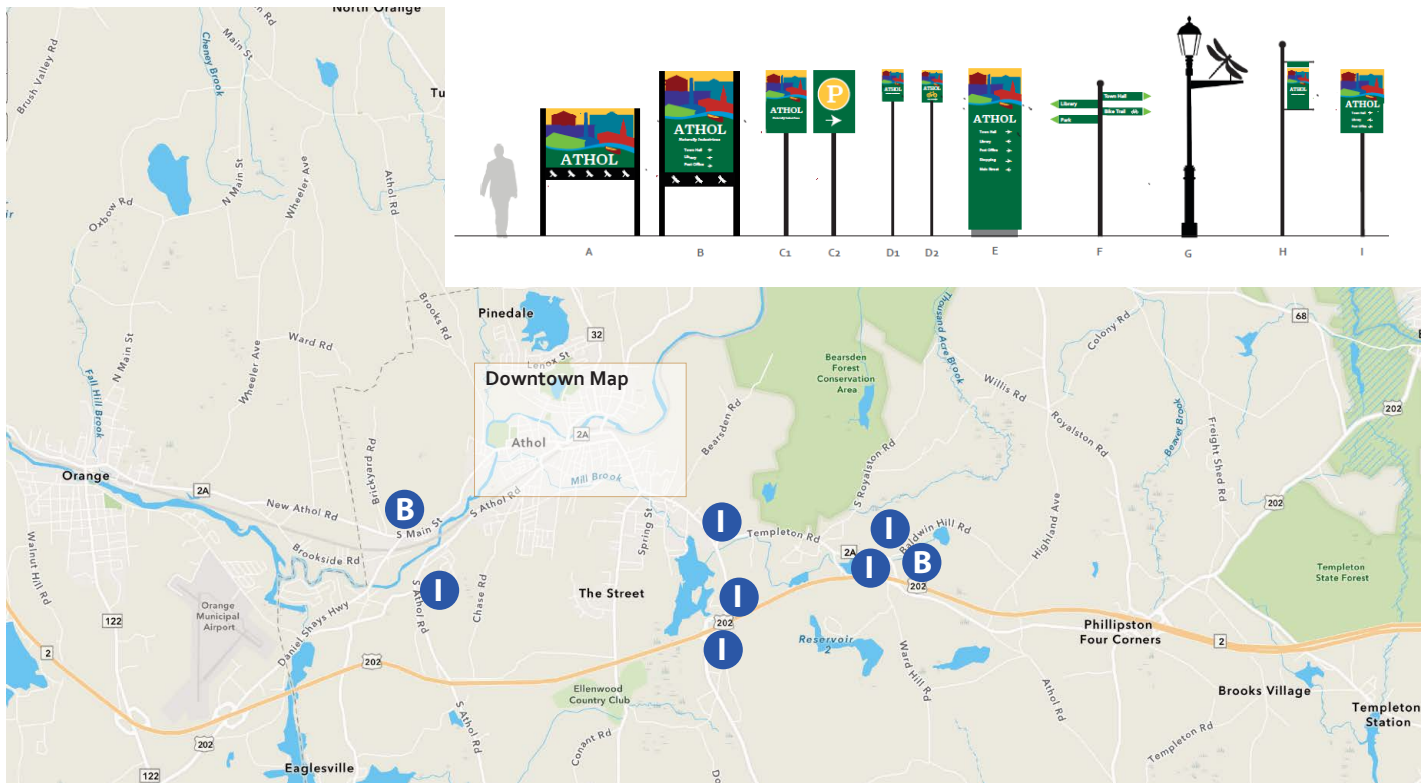




BOTTOM BANDS

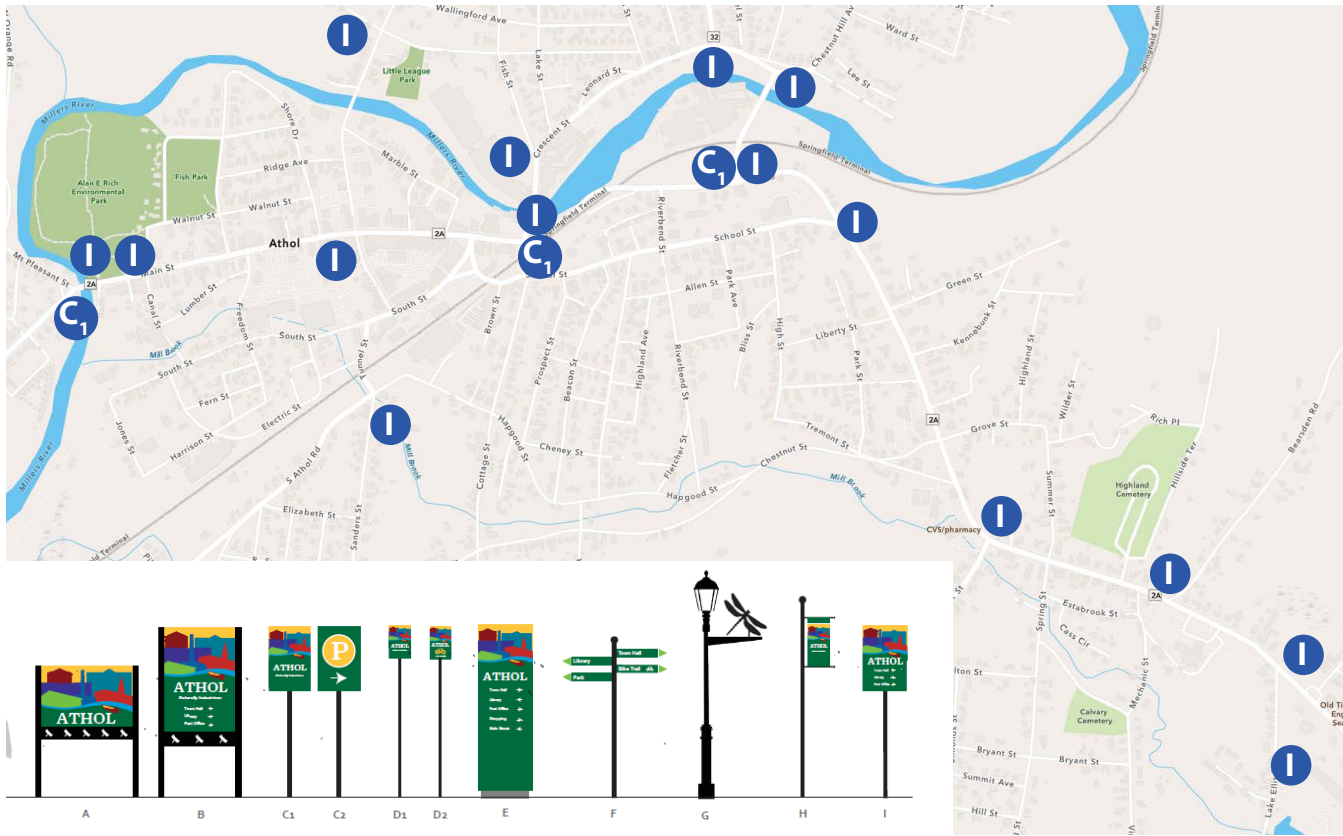


Athol Regional Wayfinding Locations



Favermann Design | August 2022
ATHOL, MA | Sign Elements and Wayfinding Locations

ATHOL LOCATION MAPS



Favermann Design | August 20
ATHOL, MA | Sign Elements and Wayfinding Location

Athol Downtown Parking Sign Locations

Note: All signs are to replace the existing parking signs with arrows.

