

large railroad classification yard and on a tannery, but neither of these is now in operation. After the destruction of the tannery by fire in 1961, the importance of manufacturing declined substantially. Of the six firms that remain in this sector, only one, a maker of industrial sewing machines, employs more than 50 workers. Nearly half of the people who work in Ayer are now engaged in wholesale and retail trade in which the pay tends to be relatively low. As a result average wage and income levels are considerably lower than in the State.

Because of the proximity of the fort, per capita sales are more than double the State average and about three times that of similar-sized towns in Massachusetts. However, many of the needs of the soldiers stationed at the post are met by base facilities, such as the post exchange and commissary, which for military personnel generally offer lower prices than commercial establishments in Ayer. Thus, the leading retail products are those such as lumber, furniture, and automobiles, which are not sold on the post. For example, the sales volume of automobiles in Ayer is four times the State average.

Although the presence of the fort currently adds considerably to the town's economic activity, it has one unfortunate psychological impact. Because many of the town's businessmen recall the closing of the fort after each of the World Wars, they feel uncertain about its future and hesitate to invest in the town's commercial facilities. Underinvestment leads to increasingly older, unattractive, and less efficient facilities which in turn lead to bypassed sales and even less investment.

Housing is another sector of Ayer's economy which is heavily influenced by the presence of the military. Due to the demand provided by civilian and military personnel attached to the Fort, Ayer landlords are able to receive high rents for their units, with the median rent of \$86 amounting to 15 percent more than the State average. This is true despite the age and poor condition of much of the town's housing. The 1960 Census of Housing revealed that over half the town's rental units were deteriorating or dilapidated in contrast to less than one-fifth for the State as a whole. Even the opening of several hundred new housing units on the post did not reduce the demand for rental units in the town. The vacated units were rapidly rerented as families living 10 or 15 miles away moved closer.

Another aspect of Ayer's economy where the military impact is important is municipal finance. Like many suburban communities, Ayer's tax rate has been climbing steadily. The rate nearly doubled between 1952 and 1963, rising from \$45 to \$80 per thousand dollars of assessed valuation. However, unlike most communities, the dominant reason for the rising tax rate has not been mounting school costs but a lack of significant growth in the town's tax base. Ayer's school costs, although rising, are heavily supported by Federal funds. Under Public Law 874, the large proportion of school children who are dependents of post personnel qualifies Ayer's school system for large Federal grants. About 73 percent of the town's schoolchildren are qualified for these grants. As a result, over one-half of Ayer's school expenditures are paid by the Federal Government.