Mill Village Life

Mill villages were a unique feature of nineteenth century industrial development in the Blackstone River Valley. With its steep drop and numerous falls, the Blackstone River provided ideal conditions for the development of rural textile mills around which mill villages developed.

Samuel Slater began the American Industrial Revolution when he constructed the first successful textile mill in Pawtucket in 1793. By its third year of operation, the Slater Mill had 30 employees, almost all of them children. Because large, poor families were an attractive pool of labor, Slater built housing to attract them. This also concentrated his work force within easy walking distance to his mill. Since mill workers had to buy everything that they needed to survive, Slater built the company store to provide for their needs. Paying wages in the form of credit at the company store also allowed him to retain essential cash. To provide for their spiritual needs, Slater built churches and established schools near his mills. These institutions were used to socialize workers in ways that he approved.

Samuel Slater

On one hand, the creation of a company village was intended to be seen as the philanthropic act of a benevolent mill owner, a perception that would help to inspire worker loyalty. On the other, the enterprise had to be seen by investors as a justified expense, one that would ensure consistent profits by allowing management to control almost every aspect of the lives of its workers lives. Every feature of these villages - their buildings, street layouts, housing and parks - was the product of careful thought and planning.

By the time other firms entered the industry, Slater's organizational methods, later known as the Rhode Island System, had become the standard in the Blackstone River.
Valley. Under this system, the mill owner alone determined hours, earnings and physical conditions of workers. Conditions often improved when the supply of workers was limited. Conditions often declined when workers were in great supply. In the early years of the American Industrial Revolution, many families realized an increase in their standard of living as they moved from farm to factory. In the process, though, they gave up self-sufficiency for a credit-based economy centered on the company store. In later years as the supply of workers grew, it was not unusual for owners to take advantage of their power over now dependant workers.

Even in the best times, life in the mills was difficult and unhealthy. The workday started before sunrise and ended after sunset. The air in the mills was full of flying lint particles that often caused respiratory disease. The mills were cold and drafty in winter, hot and humid in summer; dirty, noisy, and uncomfortable at all times. Corporal punishment by overseers was a common practice. The danger of working near machines was always present. Workers often lost fingers, arms, or scalps to the devouring machinery.

Perhaps the best surviving example of a company mill village can be seen at the Ashton Village in Cumberland. Ashton's major growth began when the Lonsdale Company built a large mill complex along the river in 1847. From the George Washington Highway Bridge, you can get a bird's eye view of the entire complex including the large mill building and sturdy worker housing. The mill, now abandoned, was powered by water and steam and was located in close proximately to the Providence & Worcester Railroad tracks. Worker housing, now in private hands, was located across the street from the mill. Churches, commercial buildings, schools and supervisor's housing were located up the hill on the high ground along Mendon Road. It is easy to see how workers could spend their entire day, perhaps much of their life, in the quarter mile distance between the mill and the outskirts of this village.

In Woonsocket, six mill villages grew up along the Blackstone River in the area around the Woonsocket Falls. Five of these villages - Social, Jenckesville, Hamlet, Bernon and Globe - clustered around the mills of one company. The sixth and largest, Woonsocket Falls, contained the mills of several companies huddled together.

This page utilizes information from:

- *History You Can See - Scenes of Change In Rhode Island 1790-1910* written by Hadassah Davis and Natalie Robinson and published by the League of Rhode Island Historical Societies, Providence, 1986.
It was in this mill in Pawtucket, Rhode Island that Samuel Slater began the American Industrial Revolution with the construction of the first successful textile mill in 1793.

Born in Derbyshire, England on June 9, 1768, Samuel Slater became involved in the textile industry at the age of 14 when he was apprenticed in a factory that manufactured textile machines. Slater was promoted to supervisor of machinery and mill construction in his third year. By his seventh year, he knew all that there was to know about textile manufacturing.

Believing that textile industry in England had reached its peak, Slater emigrated secretly to America in hopes of making his fortune in America's infant textile industry. While others with textile manufacturing experience had emigrated before him, Slater was the first who knew how to build as well as operate textile machines. Slater, with funding from Providence investors and assistance from skilled local artisans, built the first successful water powered textile mill in Pawtucket in 1793.

By the time other firms entered the industry, Slater's organizational methods had become the model for his successors in the Blackstone River Valley. Later known as the Rhode Island System, it began when Slater enlisted entire families, including children, to work in his mills. These families often lived in company owned housing located near the mills, shopped at the company stores and attended company schools and churches. While not big enough to support the large mills which became common in Massachusetts, the Blackstone River's steep drop and numerous falls provided ideal conditions for the development of small, rural textile mills around which mill villages developed.

One of the earliest of these mill villages was Slatersville. Located on the Branch River in present day North Smithfield, Slatersville was built
by Samuel Slater and his brother John in 1803. By 1807, the village included the Slatersville Mill, the largest and most modern industrial building of its day, two tenement houses for workers, the owner's house and the company store.

In Woonsocket, six mill villages grew up along the Blackstone River in the area around the Woonsocket Falls. Five of these villages - Social, Jenckesville, Hamlet, Bernon and Globe - clustered around the mills of one company in a manner similar to Slatersville. The sixth and largest, Woonsocket Falls, contained the mills of several companies huddled together. Click here to learn more about Woonsocket's mill villages.

This page utilizes information from:

- *History You Can See - Scenes of Change In Rhode Island 1790-1910* written by Hadassah Davis and Natalie Robinson and published by the League of Rhode Island Historical Societies, Providence, 1986.
Child Labor

The system of child labor in Rhode Island mills began with Rhode Island's first textile mill - the Slater Mill. Samuel Slater's first employees were all children from seven to twelve years of age. By 1830, 55% of the mill workers in Rhode Island were children. These children worked long hours in unhealthy factories for wages less than $1 per week.

To understand why these conditions were accepted, one must look at the attitudes and circumstances of the time. Religious morality and a pervasive work ethic gave rise to the notion that "idle hands would soon do the devil's work". Even before the development of mills, children were expected to work long hours on self-sufficient family farms. For some poor families struggling to survive, factory work was a decided improvement over farm labor. Mills did not put children to work, they simply changed the type and location of work they were already doing.

The textile machines themselves played a large part in encouraging the use of child labor. Early Archwright machines were so easy to operate that unskilled children could easily operate them. More over, centralized manufacturing with machines and children under the watchful eye of an adult overseer provided the most economical method of production.

Life in the mills was difficult and unhealthy, even for adults. The workday started before sunrise and ended after sunset. The air in the mills was full of flying lint particles and it was impossible to avoid breathing these in. Respiratory disease and early death were common. The mills were cold and drafty in winter, hot and humid in summer; dirty, noisy, and uncomfortable at all times.

During all of this, children worked under the same dismal conditions as their parents. Corporal punishment by overseers was a common practice. The danger of working near machines was always present. Exhausted, sleepy children often lost fingers, arms, or
scalps to the devouring machinery.

At this time, childhood was not a time of formal schooling or of play, except for a wealthy minority. Most children's education, whether farm or factory, consisted of learning skills through experience. Formal education for mill children was often limited to the most basic reading, writing and arithmetic - taught at Sunday school on the child's day off. In many mill villages, these schools were also used to socialize workers along owner-approved lines.

In early mill villages, the owner alone determined the hours, earnings and physical conditions of workers. Given their ultimate control, it was not unusual for owners to take advantage of less powerful workers. While there was eventually legislation in Rhode Island against child labor, it was not effective. In 1910 only 48% of Rhode Island children attended school. In Woonsocket and the rest of Rhode Island, truancy laws were often ignored. It wasn't until 1938 with the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act that child labor was finally eliminated.

This page utilizes information from:

- *History You Can See - Scenes of Change In Rhode Island 1790-1910* written by Hadassah Davis and Natalie Robinson and published by the League of Rhode Island Historical Societies, Providence, 1986.
Ashton and Berkeley Mill Villages

Mendon Road, now Route 122, has been a major thoroughfare on the east side of the Blackstone River since colonial times. With power from the Blackstone River and transportation from the Providence & Worcester Railroad, it also became home to two of the Blackstone River's largest nineteenth century mill villages - Aston and Berkeley.

Located in Cumberland, Rhode Island, Ashton's major growth began when the Lonsdale Company, owned by the Providence mercantile firm Brown and Ives, built a large mill complex along the river in 1847. From the George Washington Highway Bridge, you can get a bird's eye view of the entire complex including the large mill building and sturdy worker housing. The mill, now abandoned, was powered by water and steam and was located in close proximity to the Providence & Worcester Railroad tracks. Worker housing, now in private hands, was located across the street from the mill. Churches, commercial buildings, schools and supervisor's housing were located up the hill on the high ground along Mendon Road.

A mile or two south of Ashton, the Lonsdale Company built the mill and village of Berkeley. Built five years after Ashton, the Berkeley mill is also located near the railroad tracks at the base of the hill. Worker housing was set on top of the hill with a handsome schoolhouse in between. It is easy to see how a workers could spend their entire day, perhaps much of their life, in the quarter mile distance between the mill and the outskirts of these villages.

The profitability of the Ashton and Berkeley Mills prompted the Lonsdale Company to build a new and bigger factory in Lonsdale. That mill, now the Ann & Hope Discount Store, was the largest textile mill in New England when it was finished in 1886.
Woonsocket's Nineteenth Century Churches

The oldest churches in Woonsocket are Protestant congregations that were established in association with Woonsocket's early mill villages. Catholic parishes were established later as the need for workers brought European and French-Canada Catholics to the city to work in the mills.

**Quakers**

With Quakers as the earliest settlers of the area, it is not surprising that the first place of public worship in the Woonsocket area was the Smithfield Friends Meeting House near Union Village. The Smithfield Friends Meeting House was one of a chain of Quaker meeting houses that were established along the Blackstone in the eighteenth century. Another stands on Great Road in Lincoln.

Construction of the original meeting house began in 1719 and continued on and off until 1755. In 1775, the original building was replaced with a larger structure that continued in use until 1881 when it was destroyed by fire. It was replaced by the current structure that is still in use today.

**Baptists**

An early history of the Baptists in Woonsocket can not be given due to a fire that destroyed the First Baptist Church on Main Street in 1858. The congregation was established in 1833 and the original church was constructed in 1834 on the corner of Main and High Streets. After the fire, the church was rebuilt on the site and remained there until 1890 when the land was sold to interests that ultimately erected the Longley Building. The congregation then acquired land on Blackstone Street and built a new church building in 1892. The church is accented by a 60-foot spire and has remarkable stained glass windows.
Universalist

As early as 1821, the doctrine of universal salvation was preached in Woonsocket by the Reverend Hosea Ballou. It was not until 1834 that a permanent congregation - The Woonsocket Universalist Society of Young Men - was established. In the 1840's, the congregation built a church on the corner of Main and Church Streets, now the location of RIARC. The church prospered thanks to the active support and involvement of several of Woonsocket's prominent businessmen including Willis Cook - one of the founders of the Woonsocket Foundry Company, later the Woonsocket Machine & Press Company.

In 1919, the Universalist Society voted to sell its property on Main Street and build a modern church on Earle and Snow Streets outside of the congested business-theater district. The congregation is still active today and the church is the home of the Center for the Arts and Spirituality.

Congregational

The Globe Congregational Church was established in Woonsocket in 1834. Originally, services were held in private homes or in the schoolhouse of the Dexter Ballou Mill. It was not until 1843 that a church was constructed on the corner of South Main Street and Pleasant Streets in Globe Mill Village. This building was destroyed by fire in 1904. Fortunately, the church had already moved to a new house of worship at the corner of South Main and Providence Streets. This building currently serves the parish of the St. James Baptist Church.

Episcopal

St. James Episcopal Church was organized in 1832 and was an integral part of the Bernon Mill Village. Its meetings were held in private homes or in buildings of the Woonsocket Mill Company until the church was completed in 1833.

Today, St. James Church is the oldest Protestant church in Woonsocket that remains in its original location. Significant renovations were made to the church in 1856 when the exterior was remodeled in the Romanesque style and towers were added to lengthen the structure. The church was remodeled to its current appearance in the 1930's on the church's one hundred-year anniversary.

Over the years, many of Woonsocket's most prominent citizens have been members of the St. James Episcopal Church including Samuel Green, long time superintendent of the Woonsocket Mill Company; Edward Harris, founder of the Harris Woolen Company; Lyman Cook, founder of the Woonsocket Foundry; and George W. Miller, President of the Woonsocket Machine & Press Company. The congregation is still active today.
Methodist Church

The Methodist Church held services in the Social Mill until a church was constructed in 1836. The church was located on Main Street at the location of the old Post Office, now the YMCA pool. The congregation prospered on this location for many years until a new church was built on Federal Street in 1907. The congregation is still active today.

Catholic

It is believed that the first Catholic to take up permanent residence in Woonsocket was Michael Reddy in 1826. Ready was an Irish immigrant who came to Woonsocket as a laborer on the Blackstone Canal. Eventually, he settled on Front Street near the Bernon Mill Village and took up farming. Reddy became a leader in Irish community and organized the first Catholic service in Woonsocket in 1828.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Irish were the largest ethnic group in Woonsocket with half of the population of Irish decent. The Irish community, overwhelmingly Roman Catholic, established the first Roman Catholic Church in Woonsocket in 1844. When that church burned in 1862, they built the Church of St. Charles Borromeo on North Main Street.

By the 1870's, the Irish and French-Canadian communities were approximately equal in size and it was decided that the French-Canadians should have their own parish. The first French-Canadian parish in Woonsocket was "Precieux Sang" - Precious Blood Church - established 1872 on the corner of Park Avenue and Carrington Avenue. Eventually, Woonsocket had five French-Canadian parishes - Precious Blood, St. Anne, St. Louis, Our Lady of Victories and Holy Family. Through the church, French-Canadian heritage and traditions were passed down to succeeding generations and "la survivance" thrived in Woonsocket.

A second predominately Irish parish - Sacred Heart - was established in the Fairmount District in 1895. The original Sacred Heart Church was located as at Second Avenue and Olo Street. Not long after, the current Sacred Heart Church on Second Avenue was completed.

Other ethnic parishes in Woonsocket include St. Anthony's (Italian), St. Stanislaus (Polish) and St. Michael (Ukrainian Catholic)

Presbyterian

The First Presbyterian Church is the youngest Protestant denomination in the city. The congregation was established in 1887 and a Queen Anne style church was constructed on the corner of Green and Bernon Streets. In 1904, the congregation
moved to a new Shingle style church at the corner of Spring and Blackstone Streets. The congregation was dissolved in the 1950's.

**Jewish**

In the late nineteenth-century, Jewish residents in Woonsocket became numerous enough to justify forming a congregation. A congregation was formed in 1893 named the Lovers of Peace. This name was changed to the Congregation B'nai Israel in 1902.

In its early years, the congregation worshipped in the National Globe Bank and in the Lees Block on Main Street. In 1892, the congregation purchased land on Willow Street for a synagogue. Before they could build, though, the former Presbyterian Church on Green Street became available. The congregation purchased the building in 1904 and remodeled and rededicated it. It was used by the congregation until 1962 when a new synagogue was constructed on Prospect Street.

The new synagogue served not only as a focal point for religious activities, but also as an education and social center. The most striking feature of the modernist structure are the twelve triangular stained glass windows that depict the various phases of Jewish history.

Thanks to the Woonsocket Call for featuring my presentation on Woonsocecket's Historic Churches at the Museum of Work and Culture on January 29, 2006.

This page utilizes information from:

- *History of Woonsocket* written by E. Richardson and published by S.S. Fosse Printers, Woonsocket, 1876 (printed by Higginson Book Company, Salem, MA)
Woonsocket's Original Mill Villages

The City of Woonsocket was formed in 1888 from six mill villages which grew up along the Blackstone River in the area around the Woonsocket Falls. Five of these villages - Social, Jenckesville, Hamlet, Bernon and Globe - originally clustered around the mills of one company. The sixth and largest, Woonsocket Falls, contained the mills of several companies huddled together.

- **Woonsocket Falls Village**

  The Woonsocket Falls Village occupied most of what is now downtown Woonsocket. Market Square was a dense warren of factories from the 1820's to the middle of the present century. Industrial buildings extended along the east side of Main Street as far as City Hall. Below, in the area of the Main Street Bypass, stood more mills.

  Water to power the mills around Market Square, on Main Street and below on the bypass was provided by a system of canal like trenches fed from the dam at the falls. Control of the water through the trenches determined how much machinery could be operated and when it could run. These trenches, now neglected, were vital to the economy of Woonsocket and remain a significant feature of its industrial heritage.

  The Woonsocket Falls Village, located on the main road and centrally located to the other villages, became the downtown hub and central business district. Banks, stores, hotels, theaters and churches coexisted with textile mills making Main Street the social and commercial center of the city.

- **Bernon Mill Village**

  Bernon, though not the largest village in early
nineteenth century Woonsocket, was certainly the most ambitious. The owners of the Bernon Mills sought to create a model mill village, beautiful to behold, pleasant to work in and profitable.

Originally known as Danville, Bernon was founded in 1827 when the Russell Manufacturing Company built a stone factory in the area. In 1832, two prominent Providence industrialist, Sullivan Dorr and Crawford Allen, bought out the Russell Manufacturing Company, formed the Woonsocket Mill Company and renamed the village Bernon.

A year later, Dorr and Allen built the 1833 Bernon Mill, one of Rhode Island's most handsome industrial buildings. Contrary to accepted practice, they dispensed with the stair tower and attic windows to create a building which reflected the newly fashionable Greek Revival style. In 1835, a third mill was added to the complex, and in 1859 a forth.

In 1872, steam power was added to supplement waterpower from the Bernon Pond. By 1889, the Woonsocket Mill Company had 15,000 spindles, 337 looms and 300 employees involved in the manufacture of cotton print goods. Eventually, the site became the property of the Blackstone Valley Gas and Electric.

**Social Village**

The Social Mill Village began in 1810 when Ariel, Abner and Nathan Ballou, Eber Barlett, Job and Luke Jenckes, Oliver Leland and Joseph Arnold formed the Social Manufacturing Company and began production of cotton thread in a small wooden mill on the Mill River near Social Street. The mill contained 2,000 spindles and included carding and repairing machinery. A second wooden mill was constructed in 1827. In 1841, Dexter Ballou acquired the entire complex and completed construction of a new and much larger stone mill the following year.

Since the new mill required hundreds of workers that were not available in the area at the time, labor was recruited from Canada on a massive scale from the 1850's through the 1870's. Housing was built in a vacant area between what is now Clinton and Social Streets. A new shopping area also developed to serve local residents since it was a long walk to the stores and shops on Main Street. The famous "Social Corner" at the intersection of Cumberland and Social Streets was the center of life in the Social district by the 1870's.

Three large mills dominated life in the Social district in the early twentieth century:

- **Social Mill**

  By the turn of the century, Woonsocket's first textile
mill had grown to become one of the largest manufacturing enterprises in the area. Rebuilt in 1874 after a devastating fire, the Social Mill was 5 stories tall and built of brick. Two stair towers relieved the large front facade. It was powered by a 1,000 horsepower Corliss engine in addition to 240 horsepower from the Mill River. The mill contained 55,600 spindles, 1,380 looms and had 650 workers involved in the manufacture of cotton goods. The mill closed in the 1920's.

- **Nourse Mill**

Built and operated by the Social Manufacturing Company in 1883, the Nourse Mill was named in honor of Charles Nourse, the long time superintendent of the Social Mill. The three story brick building was powered by a 1,200 horsepower Corliss engine and contained the finest equipment of its day. The mill contained 40,000 spindles, 540 looms and had 380 employees. By the 1930's, the mill was being operated by the Woonsocket Rayon Company and was the site of violent protests during the **Great Textile Strike 1934**. The building was destroyed by fire in 1956.

- **American Wringer Company**

By 1870, the **Bailey Wringer Company** was producing 50,000 wringers per year. In need of more space, it moved from Island Place to a new location in the Social district on the corner of Pond and Social Street. Eventually, the company's mill filled the entire block along Pond Street from Social Street to Clinton Street.

While the **Social district** was the home to Woonsocket's first textile mill, little remains that would attest to the fact that this area was once a thriving mill village. Today, the mills are gone, replaced with a mixed use area including office, retail, residential and recreational areas.

- **Jenckesville**

Located in the area around the intersection of Mill and Social Streets, Jenckesville was the smallest of Woonsocket's six mill villages. Jenckesville was established in 1822 when Job and Luke Jenckes sold their interest in the Social Manufacturing Company constructed Woonsocket's first stone factory at what is now 96 Mill Street. Though partially hidden by a 1901 brick addition, it was the city's oldest surviving industrial building until it was destroyed by fire on June 9, 2000. In 1828, the Jenckes' built a second mill at 767 Social Street. The **fine stonework of this building** is still visible on the rear and side elevations. In 1828, the Jenckes also built an imposing three story federal style "mansion" at 837-839 Social Street. This **house**, now obscured by a three-story porch added in the 1890's, is one of the
finest federal style buildings in Woonsocket and is included in the National Register of Historic Places.

• **Hamlet Village**

While the Hamlet area contains some of Woonsocket's largest mill buildings, little remains of the original Hamlet mill and village.

The original Hamlet Village dates from 1825 when General Edward Carrington, a major influence in the creation in the Blackstone Canal, built a textile mill near what is today Hamlet Avenue and Davidson Street. Stephen Smith, an associate of Carrington and builder of Hearthside and the Butterfly Mill in Lincoln, served as the agent of the Hamlet Mill for many years.

The original Hamlet Mill was 5 stories tall and built of stone. By 1889, it contained 18,000 spindles, 387 looms and had 225 employees. It was powered by water producing 400 horsepower and by a 150 horsepower steam engine.

The mills which stand on this site today were built by French and Belgian industrialist who were encouraged to locate in Woonsocket by Aram Pothier in the late nineteenth century. These firms, Lafayette Worsted and French Worsted, were attracted to Woonsocket by its large, highly skilled, French speaking work force. The mills produced yarn using the "French process" for distribution nation-wide.

• **Globe Village**

The Globe Village encompassed the area southeast of the Woonsocket Falls and was named for the Globe Mill which stood between Front Street and the river.

The first mill was built on this site in 1827 when James Arnold sold the land and one quarter of the water rights from the Woonsocket Falls to Thomas Arnold, Thomas Paine and Marcel Shove. The company they started, the Globe Manufacturing Company, went bankrupt in 1829. After a succession of owners, Woonsocket industrialist George Ballou acquired the property in 1864.

In 1873, Ballou built a magnificent new mill at the Globe site. It was a large mill, five stories tall, built of stone with 560 windows. Ballou had the entire structure painted white. The mill was powered by three water wheels producing 250 horsepower and a large Corliss steam engine producing 750 horsepower. In 1889, the mill contained 41,040 spindles, 933 looms and had 500 workers.

Ballou died three years after the completion of the Globe Mill and the complex
was sold to the Social Manufacturing Company. The Social Manufacturing Company operated the mill until it was acquired by the Manville-Jenckes Company in the early 1900's. Manville-Jenckes operated the mill until 1927 when it was closed. The mill buildings were demolished in the 1940's but employee housing on Front and Lincoln Street still remains.

In the late nineteenth century, these six villages began to agitate for political independence from the towns that controlled them - Smithfield and Cumberland. In 1867, the Cumberland villages, including Woonsocket Falls, Social and Jenckesville, officially became the town of Woonsocket. In 1871, the three Smithfield villages, Hamlet, Bernon and Globe, were added to the town establishing Woonsocket's present boundaries. The town of Woonsocket became the city of Woonsocket in 1888.

This page utilizes information from: