

## The Cotton Industry in Colebrook River

The Sawyer Brothers cotton mill was in operation from 1840 until 1890. It was by far the largest employer Colebrook ever had - at times employing 200, but with an average of about 100. There were many “factory houses”, most of which were on the east side of the river, across the bridge located next to the factory building itself. Prior to 1840, Charles Sawyer erected a gristmill at this site, a few hundred yards south of the Massachusetts border. In 1840 his brother Henry built the cotton mill at the same site, utilizing the in-place dam along with the riparian water rights already in the family.

Before going further, it is important that the reader understand the reasons behind the location of the early cotton industry in North America.

The cotton industry in the United States had its origins in England. The earliest references to the industry there was in the early 1600's, when in 1610 a law was enacted which stated that the British requirement for naturalization had a clause stating that “any foreigner who should engage for three years in England, Wales or Scotland, in hemp, flax or cotton cloth manufacture should, upon taking oaths of allegiance before two justices of the peace, enjoy all privileges of natural-born subjects.”

Cotton cloth manufacturing began in the same district that the woolen trade was already established, because the woolen labor force could be easily converted to the working of cotton.

The popularity of the fabrics produced by the rising cotton industry enabled it to pay higher wages, and the skills required took much time and precluded using unskilled, or to use a term used in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – “unemployable persons.” Thus the original workers, skilled in manufacturing woolen and flaxen products, were forced economically out of the district to re-settle elsewhere, leaving the highly paid cotton workers as the sole economic survivors.

As the modern cotton industry spread outward from England to the Continent and to the United States, the skills required automatically attracted a more intelligent segment of the workforce, thus perpetuating the higher salary rate over manufacturing jobs. Because of this, the cotton industry was able to attract skilled workers from diverse geographical locations.

U. S. tariffs protected the cotton industry from the very beginning of our republic. In 1790 there was a 7½ % duty rising slowly until the 1840's when it had reached 30%. It continued gradually upward until by the end of the nineteenth century tariffs had reached 68%. Cotton thread had risen to a rate equivalent to 375%.

The American home market consumed almost the entire product of the American looms.

As early as 1831 there were 800 factories manufacturing cotton products, most of which were in New England. As a point of reference, England, the world leader, consumed 300,000,000 pounds of cotton annually, while the U. S. consumed 77,000,000 pounds. More importantly, the cost of production in the U.S. was 19% less than in England.

Massachusetts, the leading state in the United States in cotton products, in 1865, (when the Sawyer Cotton Mill was already 25 years old) had 24,151 persons employed in the production of cotton goods, and they produced 175,000,000 yards of cotton shirting. Ten years later, in 1875, the Massachusetts operators numbered 60,176 and their

production was 874,000,000 yards. The operators had increased 150% and their production had increased 500%.

Small operators in old wooden plants using equipment that was not state-of-the-art cannot compete economically under such conditions.

The reasons for the industry establishing itself in the Northeast were several. In addition to plentiful waterpower, climatic conditions had to be taken into account when determining the location of cotton spinning. Humidity is important, as some dampness is essential to make the fibers cling, but excessive moisture is a disadvantage. This was the primary reason cotton mills couldn't have been built in the Deep South where the cotton was grown. Another factor that was important in the establishment of the cotton industry was the disadvantages of other sources of employment, such as bad climate for agriculture, declining productivity of the soil and the shifting of animal husbandry from one region to another. Combinations of these factors prevent the absorption of population into agricultural pursuits and make the now excess population readily available to an industrial based economy contained within the confines of large factory buildings.

As to the demise and eventual abandonment of the Colebrook River cotton mill, in addition to the factors already mentioned must be added transportation and evolving technology. The railroad came to and stopped in Winsted, nine miles short of the factory. As all the raw materials and all finished products had to be shipped by horse-drawn wagons over this distance, it rapidly became cost inefficient.

The world production of cotton underwent major changes in the years prior to the twentieth century, led for the most part by the U.S. with the introduction of labor-saving devices and improvement of the looms, causing thousands of workable old looms to be scrapped. Thus the work force was reduced and older and smaller mills, no longer able to compete, were abandoned.

The human factor in the Sawyer Cotton Mill can be envisioned by the names of the ethnic groups drawn to Colebrook because of the cotton industry and whose surnames still abound in this part of Connecticut.

There were the twins John and Patrick Sullivan, born in Ireland in 1834 and who were established cotton spinners in Colebrook in 1864, as attested to in the Colebrook Births and Records book when each of them became fathers. They would have learned their profession at a time when spinning and weaving were splitting apart to become separate entities and thus carried with them from Ireland a most valuable commodity to Sawyer's Mill.

France during the latter half of the nineteenth century was the world's fourth largest producer of cotton goods after England, U.S. and Germany. One of France's leading cotton producing regions was Alsace, on her eastern boundary with Germany. Much political tension existed over the sovereignty of Alsace, which eventually was resolved in 1871 with Germany's acquisition of the region. Some of the French names from The River are Bourquin, Pequignot, Verchot, Prevo, Rose and Rebillard.

Highly skilled people in France, living in troublesome times and having the skills they possessed in cotton manufacturing surely account for so many French names appearing in Colebrook River when Sawyer's mill was in operation.

In the possession of the Colebrook Historical Society is a small volume entitled "The Amy Baxter Story", written by a one-time schoolteacher who had come to The

River in the 1880's and who wrote down her remembrances as an elderly retiree to Florida in the 1950's. Here is what she had to say about the cotton mill:

“On the west side of the river was the Sawyer Cotton Mill, the office, the building where the bales of cotton first came and the factory itself. There was a millpond and raceway. On the east side of the river was a row of tenement houses owned by the Sawyers. Some of the houses were so close to the river bank that the old privies were wired to the trees, or fastened to the houses and were frequently torn away when the river went on a rampage in the Spring, or the ice went out in a January thaw. Usually the occupants of these houses were the poorest class, or new comers.

The old French families were a thrifty lot, owning their homes. Many had come from the same towns in France. Some had started in as charcoal burners, following after timber cutting, their children going to the mill to work.

One heard as much French as English on the street and they were a gay and prosperous people, so that when the mill finally shut down, they left for other towns with money to buy good homes elsewhere.

Porter Carpenter was superintendent of the mill. ‘Old Port’ he was spoken of behind his back. He ruled the mill and the workers like a czar, yet most of them liked him, and felt him to be fair. School laws were lax in those days, and some parents didn't hesitate to move the children's birthdays up a bit to get them in the mill. Many of the boys and girls went to school the winter term only. There were two rooms with about thirty children in each room.

When the mill was running, it employed about one hundred. The cotton duck that it turned out was of a very fine quality, and in much demand until the cotton business moved elsewhere and the Sawyer family ceased to be interested. [An example of the cotton product made at Colebrook River can be seen at the Society rooms in Colebrook Center.]

About the turn of the century the Sawyer brothers had an offer of \$25,000 for the building and machinery. This they refused, but after a few years were glad to accept \$4,500.

The machinery in the mill was finally sold to the Slaters, who ran the hotel. They in turn disposed of it to dealers in second-hand machinery.”