

The Cotton Industry in New England *[Don't publish]*

The Cotton industry in the United States had its origins in England. The earliest references to it is in the first decade of the 17th century, when in 1610, a law entitled “Act of James I, 2 (1610)” reads that the British requirement for naturalization had a clause which stated that any foreigner who should engage for three years in England, Wales or Berwick [a former county in southern Scotland], in hemp, flax or cotton cloth manufacture should, upon taking oaths of supremacy and 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 fibers 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 of the current era – 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 work force, thus perpetuating the higher salary rate over the other 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 1840s, 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 all the 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 United States consumed 77,000,000 pounds. More importantly, the cost of production in the U. S. was 19% less than England.

Massachusetts, the leading state in the United States in cotton products, in 1865, (when the physical plant of Sawyer's 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 had increased 500%.

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

Consumption of cotton in the U.S. was 75,000,000 pounds in 1830, 390,000,000 pounds in 1860 and 1,000,000,000 pounds in 1890.

Henry Sawyer built the cotton mill in Colebrook River in 1840. In all probability the site was chosen because it already belonged to his brother Charles, who had a gristmill there with a dam across the West Branch of the Farmington River.

The reasons the cotton industry established itself in New England, in addition to the ethnic factors already stated, were plentiful streams having a gradient sufficient to run water wheels, and the climatic conditions found in Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut. Cotton fibers are very difficult to work with. If humidity is too high, they fly around; if too low, static electricity causes them to cling to the machinery and everything else near them. Before the advent of electricity and climate controlled buildings, New England had the best natural conditions, thus the cotton bales were shipped here from the southern plantations. Another factor 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 material and all the 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 dawning of 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 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 a father. They would have learned their profession at the 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.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century France was the world's fourth largest producer of cotton goods after England, United States 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.

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

There was a teacher in the Colebrook River School by the name of Amy Baxter, who wrote her memoirs covering the period from approximately 1888-1940s. Here is what she had to say about the cotton industry in Colebrook River:

“On the west side of the river was the Sawyer Cotton Mill; the office, the lapper, where the bales of cotton came first, and the factory. 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 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 the 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, and about thirty children in each room.

When the mill was running, it employed about a hundred. The cotton duck, which 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. [1890]

About the turn of the century the Sawyer brothers had an offer of \$25,000.00 for the building and machinery. This they refused, but after a few years were glad to accept \$4,500.00

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,”