

The Yarn-Beam Cannon

On page 177 of B. A. Botkin's A Treasury of New England Folklore, in a chapter entitled "Historical Traditions", is the following account:

"Hard on the heels of the Revolution came Shay's Rebellion. The Berkshire farmers, oppressed by heavy taxes, hard times and almost worthless post-Revolutionary currency, understood better than the 'city folks' in Boston the real purpose of Daniel Shay's uprising. Lee (the town) was in particularly hard straits. In the winter of 1787, a battle more comic than tragic took place between the Shaysites and the government troops under General Patterson, drawn up on a hill in East Lee. Uniformed troops these, with polished rifles and menacing cannon. Opposite, across Greenwater Brook, were lined up the ragged and hungry rebels. They had only a few old-fashioned muskets, little ammunition and no cannon. But someone had an inspiration. 'Bring out Mother Perry's yarn-beam,' he cried; 'we'll make it look like a cannon to scare the sheep across the way.' Quickly the ponderous piece of weaving machinery, looking remarkably like a cannon, was mounted on a pair of ox-cart wheels. A ramrod and other military gadgets were flourished for the benefit of the enemy. Peter Wilcox roared the order, 'Fire,' and a blazing tarred rope was brandished like a fuse. Before the flames could damage Mother Perry's property, General Patterson's troops were in flight. In a twinkling, the hill they had occupied was bare."

The reason this particular entry caught my eye is the fact that up in Jim Draper's attic, there is a 17 foot-long wooden tubular device having about a two-foot diameter that no one in town can positively identify. The only way it could have found its way into the attic would have been through the attic window, three stories high. It seems unlikely that the device would (or could) have been used in the attic. I have heard one theory put forth that it might have been used in the manufacture of carpets. The front section of this house (561 Colebrook Road) was built in 1796 by Reuben Rockwell, son of Samuel. After his death, his son Reuben owned and occupied it until his death in 1898. After this date, it is unlikely that this type of device would have been employed around these parts due to the availability of commercially produced carpets (or whatever else it might have been used for). It is also unlikely that any portion of that Rockwell house would have been used for the manufacture of any product while either Reuben lived there.

Sarah Carrington, in her Record of Residents of Colebrook Homes, written in 1926, but containing her remembrances, which could have gone back as far as the 1850s, mentions that on Water Street (now named Center Street) in a house since burned, there once lived a lady named "Aunt Sally", whom she remembered as having a loom on which she wove rag carpets in a building opposite her house. Dr. Ben Thomas, the Winchester Municipal Historian, informs me that a yarn-beam was a component of a loom, and apparently one that had been constructed expressly for the weaving of carpets. This same definition was supplied to me by Miss Betty Dennis, historian for East Lee, Mass., who told of the "battle" between Shay's rebels and the federal troops. The location today appears much different from its appearance in 1787, as the meadow has since been flooded and is presently known as Greenwater Pond. If traveling up Conn. Route 8 to access the Mass. Turnpike, it is the large lake on the left side of U. S. 20 after passing under the Mass. Pike. Miss Dennis also informs me that two of the houses that were present at the time of the skirmish are still in use to this day.

The yarn-beam in Draper's attic is constructed on an octagonal axle six inches in diameter and 16 feet, three inches long. Extending from each end are 1½ -inch square iron axles giving the over-all length of 17 feet. At each end are 2½-inch wide wooden hoops mounted upon four strips of wood approximately 1 inch by 3 inches extending the full length of the device. All surfaces that come into contact with the yarn were covered with either sailcloth or canvas. Much of this is still in place. Yarn was wrapped around the device in a tight, close-spaced spiral in order to feed the material into the loom perpendicularly. It doesn't seem likely that the object in the attic would have been transported any great distance just to be stored three stories high and never again used unless whoever put it there wanted it preserved as a unique artifact, and this particular attic was judged to have been the safest location in town.

The ranks of men who made up Shay's army of protesters consisted primarily of Massachusetts men, although we know that among them were some from Connecticut, Vermont, and most likely New York State as well. The leaders and some of the participants were given death sentences at the conclusion of hostilities, but the Massachusetts Legislature, while exonerating their residents, couldn't extend such protection upon out-of-staters.

Considering the injustices that Shay's Rebellion sought to rectify, such as the taking of homes and possessions of veterans of Washington's army, when they could not pay their taxes due to the scarcity and devaluation of the Continental currency, it very well might have been a cause that the Rockwells embraced. Even if none of them were present that day in East Lee, might not a yarn-beam have been a symbol to the supporters of Shay's followers?

Perhaps this comes under the heading of wild speculation, but if someone has another explanation for preserving a very long and awkward artifact that has absolutely no possible future use, in the attic of one of the town's leading citizens, I would like to hear it.

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