

# THE SUTTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY BULLETIN



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SUTTON, MASSACHUSETTS

SUTTON'S STEPPING STONES  
Carilyn E. Philbrook, *Editor*

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## SMALL MILLS ON SINGLETARY BROOK

by WILLIAM BIGGER BRIERLY

During the Colonial Period in American history, local manufacturing and processing of goods and materials were discouraged by the parent country- for this is one way that the "mother country" had to keep the settlers in line by dominating commerce.

The rebelling colonies, during the Revolution, encouraged all types of manufacturing to fill the vacuum created by the conflict and to provide the basic necessities for fighting the war. After the revolution and particularly after 1793 when Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin, the trend toward production of local textile goods became more and more important until the states became self-sufficient.

Singletary or Mill Brook was early recognized as an ideal source for water power. It is underlain by solid basement rocks (gneiss) within a narrow valley in which dams could be easily constructed and firmly anchored. Its forest-covered slopes were underlain by glacial sands and gravel soils that gradually transmitted the more than 40 inches of well distributed annual rainfall underground to the streams and ponds in a steady flow. It has a substantial reservoir in Singletary Pond that usually provides an adequate steady flow to the mills and within a mile and a quarter of the pond there is a fall of 212 feet providing many opportunities for dam construction. There is an average flow of 12,732 cubic feet of water per second from the pond and the water power furnished is about 1,078 horse power to each foot of head and fall of water. In other words a dam 10 feet high has the potential of 10,780 horse power [1 horse power equals 746 watts]. Additional environmental conditions favoring the development and growth of the mills, were a short growing season for crops which had meager yields, a long winter of restricted productiveness that released from the farm a large, cheap and intelligent labor supply for work in the mills at a time when it was most needed. Other factors that contributed to the brook's importance were a local supply of raw materials and a local market for the manufactured products.

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## SMALL MILLS (Cont'd)

Singletary [Mill] Brook, the drainage outlet of Singletary [Crooked] Pond, for a brief period in the history of Sutton and Millbury, provided the setting for a considerable number of small industries which dominated the production of certain basic commodities for the people of the area. The grist mill to grind the grain for flour and the saw mill to produce lumber for building and construction materials. The village blacksmith or the farmer provided the necessary metal implements and accessories.

In 1720 the first grist mill was established by Ebenezer Dagget on Singletary Brook a short distance from the pond. This was followed 1721 by a saw mill just below the grist mill. A paper mill was established in 1776 and in 1808 a series of textile mills that utilized flax and wool from local sources and cotton from imported sources. Over the years, flour, lumber, linen, woolen and cotton cloth, linseed oil, paper, scythes and other metal implements, powder and guns were produced. The area was physically and economically ideal at the initial level of technological development for use of local source materials for local processing and local sale. With the advent of steam power and later electricity, the importance of the physical environmental factors that had drawn the mills to Singletary Brook, gradually lessened until factors favoring other sites and areas in the U.S. proved to be more important. In the primary period of water power use and horse and wagon transportation from 1720 to about 1808, Singletary Brook was supreme. Commencing with the second period from 1808 to about 1850, a rapid growth of population with increased market caused an expansion of industries from an overcrowded Singletary Brook to the Blackstone River. After 1828 increased use of coal brought in by barge on the Blackstone Canal and by railroad from Providence after 1847, a gradual shift to steam power took place and at the same time provided greater access to outside markets for the items produced in the mills. In the third or steam power period from 1850 to about 1910, steam power use increased to 32% in 1885 and to 70% by 1905. With the advent of electric power, mills could be built anywhere high tension lines could reach. At this stage, environmental conditions which had been responsible for the full development of Singletary Brook were no longer vital and other factors such as electric power, higher wage scales, shorter working hours, restricted market resulting from specialization of product, higher state and town taxes, lack of available capital to modernize and economic conditions in general, caused a decline in the textile industry on Singletary Brook.

The industrial history of Millbury is closely entwined and inseparable from the history of Sutton before 1813 when Millbury became a town. By 1775 seven water rights or privileges were granted along Singletary Brook at which mills could be established and dams built to provide the necessary water head for the power needed. Various types of mills were established at these dams - one mill succeeding another seemingly in endless procession - some were successful but most probably ended in dubious financial position. More than a few of the mills were gutted by fire. All of the mills, however, provided a source of ready cash for the people of the area and provided another stepping stone in the development of the area.

Details about many of these small mills are not presently known, but it is improbable that they escaped acknowledgement in the few newspapers or trade journals which existed at that time since they provided a source of revenue to the area.



A considerable amount of information about a few of the mills has come to the attention of the writer over the years from a wide variety of sources related to genealogical research, some of which contradicts information published in some of the major sources. In the interest of local history, it is deemed significant enough to be recorded for future readers. It is not known whether or not the data presented is typical of many of the mills but it is factual. It is presented as a beginning of a series of reports on a brook that played major role in the development of several towns in central Mass. and was a significant tributary brook to one of the most important rivers in the development of the textile industry in the U.S. - the Blackstone River.

The data presented has been culled from town and county histories and biographies, reports of town officers, town tax reports, stock certificates, probate court records, U.S. and U.K. patents, census reports, town and county maps and atlases.

The report normally would begin with the first mills at each privilege and give a complete sequence of the mills at the site. A departure has been made in this presentation because the smaller mills have been overlooked or just briefly mentioned in the town histories and biographical reports. The first part of the report will cover mills during the 1850-1875 period and is specifically the result of research on the writer's family. It is hoped that this effort may stimulate others to contribute data that they may have available referring to the period or to other periods of time in the history of Singletary Brook. The first report will cover the Emerson & Brierly Cotton Mills which existed from 1861-1870. Other mills already researched will cover the Brierly Paper Mills 1851-1857, J. Brierly Cotton Mills 1865-1873 and the

Bramanville Cotton Mills 1871-1875. A map showing the location of each building of each of the mills has been prepared and will be included.

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#### UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

by ALICE CLARK RILEY

Whence have you traveled,  
Wayfarer, he?

Whence have you traveled to  
Sutton?

Have you come from old Salem  
Or the banks of the Whalom--  
Or down by the Ocean

Where all is commotion?

Have you found you some land  
With a neighboring stand  
Of hemlock and oak and hard  
maple?

Have you come with a neighbor  
To help with your labor,  
Or will you contrive it alone?

Are these meadows greener,  
The streams running cleaner  
Than those you have known  
heretofore?

Have you come for a reason,  
Or just for a season  
To sojourn with folks you have  
known?

Will you leave here a token,  
Well-wrought or broken,  
A clue to your link with the past?  
Have you done with your questing?  
Have you found aught arresting  
To hold you in Sutton at last?

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#### ITEMS RECENTLY DONATED TO THE SOCIETY

Beulah Wallace - A 3hp electric motor which may be used to run the line shafting at the Blacksmith Shop for demonstration purposes.

The David Welsh Family - A one horse sleigh, a "Surrey with the Fringe on Top", and a nearly complete set of ice harvesting tools.

## A NEW ADVENTURE FOR YOU

Would you like a new adventure in your life? Your article for the "Sutton's Stepping Stones" could begin a new adventure for you as it did for Mr. William Brierly. To write the article that now appears in the Bulletin he did a lot of research. He went to Washington, D.C. to their record department and back home to check the written records around here. He interviewed relatives of people who were involved in his family's businesses and many more besides. Bill enjoyed working on the articles to follow and he hopes you enjoy reading them.

You could spend sometime in the day and go through your family's photographs and writings. When you send your black and white photograph you will receive it back in its original state.

Perhaps you would like to sketch an illustration for the Bulletin. Make sure that it is a pen drawing.

Have you read a book or the part of a book that tells about Sutton or maybe it was about one of our local heroes? You could write a book review on what you read.

If you have some ideas for the Bulletin, please send them to me. The Sutton Historical Society has some writers who want to know what you are interested in. They will do their best to write a very precise article about your interested subject.

So you see you are now at the door of a new adventure. Once you write your story or poem, draw a sketch, found that old picture or some writing from your ancestor you would like to share, please send it to me. Most of all you will be sharing your treasured memories with others who, like you, also love Sutton. Please let me hear from you soon.

The "Sutton's Stepping Stones" can only keep on being published if you do your part. So how about it? Will I hear from you? Soon?

Please send it directly to me: Mrs. Carilyn E. Philbrook, Editor  
P.O. Box 287, Manchaug, Mass. 01526 Phone: 476-2191

I hope, you enjoy your new adventure as much as Bill Brierly did.  
Editor

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