

THE MILLS OF WESTPORT

Notes used by Professor Martin Butler for a talk to the Historical Society on March 15, 1973.

Grain and saw mills were common to this area during the Colonial era. Along the coast grain mills were operated by the power of wind. One such windmill was located on the site of the Methodist Church at Westport point in 1795. Water powered mills were much more common, until the watersheds were destroyed for their lumber. One of the locations of a considerable amount of mill activity in the Colonial period was at Smith Mills. Before 1681 either a grist or fulling, weaving, mill had been built at this site. At one time there were as many as five mills operating there.

The earliest mill in Westport was established before the end of the seventeenth century at Adamsville by Philip Taber. The village was then known as Taber's Mills. Other early Westport mills include a saw mill built by Phineas Wordell and operated by his family between 1782 and 1833, where Bread and Cheese Brook crosses the road between Mixville and Fall River. On Sanford Road about a mile and a half south of the Narrows, Jonathan Borden built a mill which operated from 1817 to 1877. Prior to 1854, on the Lawton farm a half mile south of Mix Bridge, a mill was in operation. George M. Gifford operated a shingle mill on Mouse Mill Brook in the early 1840's. Mouse Mill was the nickname given to one of the grist mills on this brook which milled about only enough to feed a mouse.

The major center of industry in the town was located above the Head of the River. The village at the Head of Westport was situated on a main route from Plymouth and the Cape to Newport and Rhode Island. Above the village to the present Route 6 are located several mill sites which took advantage of the water power provided by the River. In 1712 three men joined together to harness this power to their advantage. George Lawton, a miller, Benjamin Waite, a carpenter, and John Tripp obtained a seventy acre site near Forge Road Corner. Lawton and Waite built two mills, one on the west side of the River, known as Lawton's Mill. The one on the east side, a third of a mile east of Forge Road Corner, was known as Waite's Mill, later Tripp's, or Chase's Mill. These mills ground grain or sawed lumber for the locality. They were not business enterprises which sold on far distant markets. Only when better transportation became available would wider markets appear, and also the danger of outside competition.

As New Bedford's maritime pursuits grew, they created an increasing demand for iron. In 1789 William Gifford and Lemuel Milk purchased the property which is now the site of the lower Westport Mill and built an iron forge. To assist them, they turned to the Leonards of Tauton, a family familiar with the iron industry in that town. This industry along the River attracted the attention of the Retch-Rodman whaling interests of New Bedford. In accordance with their policy of controlling all aspects of the whaling business, from obtaining the supplies to the sale of the catch, William Retch, Jr. purchased the Waite's Mill in 1795. For \$3,000 William Retch obtained twenty acres of land, a grist mill, saw mill, forge, coal, a storehouse, a blacksmith shop and house. Thus the Head of Westport area contributed timber, iron work and chain as well as food for the New England whaling fleet.

Whale

Further up the River, the earliest mention of a mill at what is now Westport Factory (Route 6 site) is contained in a deed dated 1795. This refers to a mill constructed by either Stephen or Ephraim Potter in that year. In the following decades, several mill operations come to our attention, yet the specific location of these enterprises remains somewhat vague. In 1811 at the upper site, Ephraim Thompson and Pardon Gifford started a carding and fulling (weaving) mill, while Timothy and Ephraim Macomber operated a sawmill there until 1812, when they sold their property to John Mason of Swansea and "others," who intended to manufacture yarn. In the following two years this group purchased extensive tracts along the River. In 1814 they assumed the name Westport Cotton Manufacturing and the Westport Mechanics Factory.

This was a promising time for domestic manufacturing enterprises, since the war with Britain effectively ended the competition of British textiles. However, the mill was not finished before the war ended, and the flood of British textiles and other manufactured articles brought about a postwar slump. Several of the original owners sold their interests in the company during the early part of 1815. The following year a protective tariff increased the price of foreign made cotton cloth fourfold. This encouraged the owners of the mill to purchase additional land around the course of the river and the shore of the lake. Nevertheless, prosperity remained as elusive as ever. The competition of mills in Rhode Island and Connecticut was too great. Yarn was even sent out to the farms in the adjacent countryside, where the women wove it into cloth. Yet even this failed to make the undertaking profitable to the mill's owners.

Bradford and Daniel M. Howland, Jr. sold the plant in April 1822 to Enoch Wiswall of Watertown and Samuel Allen of Brimfield for \$6,500. The name of the company was also changed to the simpler Westport Manufacturing Company. The following year, 1823, Samuel Allen purchased his partner's share of the business.

About 1826, fire destroyed the red wooden mill building. Mr. Allen in 1828 built the south half of the present structure of stone from the ledge just east of Lincoln Park on Route 6. While the new building was being constructed, the property was sold to another Allen, Richard of Westport, for \$15,000. Within the ensuing decade ownership changed hands several times. The depressed state of the economy after 1837 adversely affected the mill's affairs and during the forties several, varied enterprises were undertaken in the factory, each with little success.

Finally on May 13, 1854, George W. and Elijah R. Lewis bought the mill property from Gideon Allen for \$8,000, in eight annual installments. The Lewis brothers, then in their early twenties, had operated the Eagle Mill at Eagleville, Tiverton. They rented this mill, which was in need of major repairs. Deciding to purchase a mill of their own, the brothers approached Gideon Allen who was probably ready to see his hithertofore none too successful property. The Lewis brothers also purchased the

William Retch property from Anthony Gifford. The mills at this location have been called the Lower Mill, the South Mill, the Star Mill, and new Hoyt Manufacturing Company. Under the Lewis ownership this was known as Mill No. 2, built in 1872 and opened the following year. The mill building upstream on Route 6 was known as Mill No. 1. This building was enlarged in 1869 with the addition of the northern part of the building beyond the tower. This expansion illustrated the success of the Lewis undertaking.

The Westport Manufacturing Company operated between 1854 and 1938. Prior to 1916 it was essentially a three man enterprise: the Lewis brothers and their half brother, William B. Trafford, and later their sons. After 1916 it was incorporated and its stock more widely distributed within the family circle.

The company did not weave cotton cloth, rather it manufactured yard and twine from cotton waste carted in from New Bedford and Fall River mills. It produced various grades of twine, ranging from that used in dry and wet mops, to cotton twine from braiding work, caulking ships' hulls, and a variety of other uses.

Transportation was provided by company owned teams and horses. In order to reduce the time it took to travel to Fall River, the Company took an active part in the building of a shorter road (Route 6). In the early 1890's it supplied labor, teams, dump carts, stone and gravel to build this new road across the swamps.

The company employed about 150 workers, mostly of French-Canadian origin. Westport Factory was a company village largely self-sufficient, thanks to the company farm. The company operated a store for the village and also supplied coal to the inhabitants, as well as leasing and eventually selling about 30 company houses.

Changing demand, new products and greater competition gradually brought about the decline of the company's fortunes. During the Depression of the early thirties the company went into receivership. It ceased operations and filed for bankruptcy in 1938, this ending an era in the history of manufacturing activity on the Westport River.