



OLD DARTMOUTH
HISTORICAL SKETCHES

No. 41.

Being the proceedings of the Old Dartmouth Historical Society, held
in their building, Water Street, New Bedford, Massachusetts, on
January 2, 1915.

THE MILLS OF NEW BEDFORD AND VICINITY
BEFORE THE INTRODUCTION OF STEAM.

Presented by Henry B. Worth.

IN MEMORIAM.

Rev. Matthew C. Julien, Vice President of the Old Dartmouth Historical Society, Died December 19, 1914.

It is fitting that we should pause today out of respect to one of our oldest and most honored members, who has been called from his earthly pilgrimage.

From the beginning, no one has shown a more earnest interest in this society than he. His courage was always of the order that made one feel that he must do his best to have the society reach its greatest achievement. That was his inspiration, and he made others feel it.

The work that one does never ends when his life is changed, and the members of this society feel that the influence of Rev. Matthew C. Julien will be appreciated for years to come.

Let us take up the work that he began and continue it successfully, according to his high ideal.

On motion of George H. Tripp, it was voted "that the secretary of the Old Dartmouth Historical society be instructed on behalf of the same to write to Miss Sarah E. Seabury and express to her its appreciation of the bequest made to it under the will of her sister, Caroline O. Seabury.

At the close of the meeting Anna and Walton Ricketson presented to the museum three rare gifts, a silver pitcher and two gold watches.

With the silver pitcher goes the following card:

SILVER PITCHER.

Formerly belonged to Daniel Ricketson 1st, who was born in Dartmouth 8th mo. 19th 1745-O-S-and married Rebecca Russell, daughter of Joseph Russell 3d mo. 31st 1768-N. S.

Presented to the Old Dartmouth Historical society by his great grandchildren, Anna and Walton Ricketson.

Jan. 2d 1915.

The cards with the watches follow:

GOLD WATCH.

Formerly owned by Joseph Ricketson, son of Daniel Ricketson 1st.

Presented to the Old Dartmouth Historical society by his grandchildren, Anna and Walton Ricketson January 2d 1915.

GOLD WATCH.

Formerly belonged to Daniel Ricketson, historian. Presented to the Old Dartmouth Historical society by his children, Anna and Walton Ricketson, Jan. 2d 1915.

With the Joseph Ricketson watch is the following clipping from an old newspaper with an interesting history:

"Daniel Ricketson and son, grandfather and father of our historian, Daniel Ricketson, merchants in Bedford village in the early years of the century, sent a ship to London laden with a cargo of oil. Thence she went to Bremen and took on a cargo of iron. While in the North sea she sprang a leak and went to Grenock, Scotland, for repairs. While these operations were in progress war was declared between the United States and England. The vessel was seized by the British government and the crew sent to Dartmoor prison. When the ship lay in London docks, the captain (Sawdey by name) purchased, at the request of the junior member of the firm, a gold watch with an old-fashioned double case, which cost at the time twenty to thirty pounds sterling, regarded a great price in those days. This watch the captain kept during his imprisonment and on his return brought it to our historian's father, Joseph Ricketson, which was all that was ever received from ship or cargo. The case was twice brought before the English court of admiralty for adjustment, but without success. One of the crew was Samuel Parker, of Acushnet, who died twenty years ago at an advanced age."

MILLS OF OLD DARTMOUTH.

In a colonial settlement the first necessity was food and the second shelter, and for each a mill was required; one to transform corn and grain into flour and the other to prepare the forest for purposes of construction. The mill was, therefore, one of the principal institutions of every New England village, and was coeval with the meeting-house.

Streams of water and the winds furnished the only power which the colonists were able to control, and the selection depended on which was most convenient and available. Wind mills seem to have been devoted exclusively to grinding corn and grain because the power was uncertain and of less strength. They were adopted only where water was not available, as on the Island of Rhode Island.

ion. The farm given to John Russell was largely increased by purchase, so that his son Daniel possessed a very extensive domain, reaching from the river below the village to the woods north of Russells Mills and to the northwestward beyond Gidleytown, and west beyond Allen's mill. The west half Daniel gave to his son Stephen, and the east half to his son Giles. In his short life the whole of this fine property was sold by the latter and apparently squandered. What was done at the upper dam in large measure is the history of Russells Mills. The road to this dam is a private way on the north side of the village through premises once owned by Robert Gifford. Where this road reaches the river was a cinder bed and the ruins of a carding mill as late as 1900. The cinder bed was the spot where was located the only iron mill that was ever built at Russells Mills, and its origin is as follows. In 1789 Giles Russell had a grist mill at this dam. He made a contract with Benjamin Howland, Noah, Joel and Eliphalet Packard to erect a forge to make iron on the west side of the dam whereon the grist mill of Russell stood. The forge was built but could not have been a prosperous venture. Giles Russell was not an owner. Howland sold his interest in 1793 and two of the Packards had conveyed to the third. The forge is not mentioned after 1797. Before 1815 the property was owned by Abraham Russell, Joseph Tripp, Alden Macomber and Philip Dunham and included also a grist mill. In 1818 it was purchased by Warren Gifford and in 1840 owned by Robert Gifford. These mills were abandoned soon after the Civil war.

Half a mile northeast from Westport Factory and on the Noquochoke river a mill was built about 1767 by Eleazer Pratt. It was later owned by Lemuel and Henry Freelove, and in 1814 when the cotton industry was established at Westport Factory Pratt's mill was purchased by the owners of the cotton mill, and discontinued. The mill was in the town of Dartmouth.

Within the limits of the town of Westport are several mill sites where good power is furnished and at different periods ten water mills have been conducted and at the present time four are still in operation.

In the north part of Westport where the Bread and Cheese Brook crosses the road from Hixville to Fall River, was a saw mill built by Phineas Wordell and others about 1782, and was owned in that family when it was last mentioned in a deed in 1833.

A mile and a half south of the Narrows on the west side of the Sanford road is a region once called Cranberry Neck. Here was a saw mill built by Jonathan Eorden before 1817, and it was being operated in 1877.

Half a mile south of Hix Bridge on the west side of the river a mill was located on the Lawton farm before 1854 and was operated by George Lawton until recent years.

Across the river and farther south on the Wing farm near the Dell was a small mill in 1795, but it has not been operated for a number of years. Its power was the brook that flows through the Dell.

Northwest of the Head of Westport is the Mouse Mill Brook. The shingle mill had been built before 1842 and has been operated in modern times by George H. Gifford.

The earliest mill in Westport was established at Adamsville before 1703 by Philip Taber. In 1759 there was a grist and saw mill, and the same are still in operation. Among the modern owners are Isaac Washburn, John Church and Philip Gray, Jr. The last Taber who owned the property left it to his grandson, Philip Davis, who sold it in 1799 to Stephen Crandall and it then passed out of possession of the Taber family. Before that date, for a century the village had been known as Taber's Mills, and soon after 1800 it was given its present name of Adamsville.

An important group of mills in Westport was located on the river between the Head and Westport Factory, and comprised four sites on each of which have been built several mills. The southernmost is on the west side of the river half a mile north of the Head. The land was laid out in 1714 by Crane to the "saw mill men," and known as George Lawton's mill. Among the later owners were Jacob Chase, William Gifford, Isaac Macomber, Adam Gifford and Stephen Howland. About 1870 it was acquired by Alden T. Sisson. In 1842 there was a grist mill, saw mill, fulling mill, and iron mill where they made ploughshares; all were burnt, and the present saw mill built.

The "saw mill men" in 1711 were George Lawton, John Tripp and Benjamin Waite. They received layouts that included the two mill sites, one on the west side and the other on the east side of the Forge road from the Head north to Westport Factory. The mills located at the dams were known as Tripp's or Waite's mills, and after 1796 as the William Rotch mills as he had acquired the entire property. When he purchased the

mills there was a saw mill and grist mill on the east side of the road, and a forge on the west. After holding the property fifty years, Rotch sold it to Anthony Gifford. At one time the forge was operated to manufacture hoes, and Gifford had a rule factory in one of the mills east of the road. In 1854 Gifford sold the property to William B. Trafford, and after that time the property was owned by Trafford, Chase and Lewis, the owners of the mill at the Factory. The south mills were once called the Star mills, and also the Lower mills.

The most pretentious among the Westport mills is that which is located at Westport Factory. The earliest mention of a mill at this place is contained in the deed of Ephraim Potter in 1795 in which he conveyed one-third of the mill which either he or his father, Stephen, must have built during the preceding twenty years. The saw mill on the west side of the river was operated by Timothy and Ephraim Macomber until 1812 when the property was purchased by John Mason of Swansea, Joseph Strange of Taunton and Job White of Westport who were described as "the Westport company." During the next two years these men purchased extensive tracts along the river and were described as "the Westport Cotton Manufacturing Company" and also "the Westport Mechanics Factory." Beside the cotton manufactory which has already been described their property comprised a saw mill, corn mill, and three houses. The stone building was built in 1828, and the other mills discontinued.

So before the advent of steam, there were over ninety water and wind mills in the region comprised in the old town of Dartmouth. Available water power in every section of the town was utilized. Among the natural resources none was rejected. The development was greatly stimulated by the whaling and shipbuild-

ing industries in New Bedford and Fairhaven. The greatest activity was reached during the period from 1800 to 1825. Then steam became the great motive power, and the mills of Old Dartmouth one after another were discontinued until in 1915 only 12 remain: in Fairhaven not any; in Acushnet 2, in New Bedford 1, in Dartmouth 5, in Westport 4.

At the same time it cannot be said that steam alone was the single cause that destroyed so many thrifty enterprises. The farmer in a Dartmouth village could carry his bags of grain to mill and later return with the flour. This arrangement was satisfactory and convenient until the village became a city, and then the increased population required the western wheat-field and the western mill. The fulling mill could supply the wants of a region like Russells Mills, but the Tucker mill that advertised to weave cloth in 1812 would make small progress in 1915, even in that locality in supplying the modern demand.

A century's increase in population built up the competition that closed these little mills. But the mill business itself even a century ago, started in operation a destructive force. A majority were saw mills, and their work was to transform into lumber the trees that were taken from the pine and cedar swamps of Dartmouth. Every swamp that was denuded of its trees remained dry a longer period each year, and the brooks that started in those regions lessened in volume and sometimes disappeared. So the process of conducting the mill not only depleted the natural resources but impaired and ultimately destroyed the water power itself. Steam began as a competing power, but quickly assumed the enormous task that wind and water were unable to perform, and finally became the substitute when loss of forests has almost destroyed the abundant power that the English found when they first came to Dartmouth.