

Westbrook Historical Society

"A Society That Preserves the Past"

Fall 2015

Purpose:

The Westbrook Historical Society meets regularly in its rooms at the Community Center at 426 Bridge Street, Westbrook at 1:30 pm on the first Wednesday of each month.

The purpose of the Society is to bring together those people interested in the history of Westbrook, and to discover, collect, and preserve any materials and objects which establish and illustrate the history of the area.



The Development of Worker Housing in Westbrook, Maine

By Howard Levy – December 12, 2000

The growth of the textile and paper companies of Westbrook in the post-bellum period was rapid and extensive, requiring a pool of both skilled and unskilled labor that outstripped the local supply. Immigrant labor from Ireland, Scotland, and the province of Quebec were both recruited by agents of the mills and arrived independently seeking work. Although payroll records are not available, it appears that in general, gender rather than ethnicity was a determinant of the industry in which the immigrant workers were employed; females predominately worked in the textile mills and males in the paper mill. Each industry, of course, did employ both males and females.

Mill workers in Westbrook tended to reside in three areas near the mills on the north side of the river. Two were located in Saccarappa close to the textile mills and the third, near the paper mill at Cumberland Mills. The first Saccarappa area was closest to the river and included Brown Street, parts of Bridge Street and a number of small, intersecting streets, an area which became densely occupied by French Canadians in the 1870s. The second area, actually adjacent to the first but more northerly, was known as Scotch Hill. Here,

predominately, lived Scottish, Yankee and some Irish workers. Paper mill workers of various ethnicities lived at Cumberland Mills, although French Canadians appear to have been in the minority.

Both Westbrook Manufacturing and S. D. Warren provided some forms of housing for their workers. Both maintained at least one boardinghouse on either side of Brown Street which ran parallel to the river and provided access to the two villages. Warren's boardinghouse dates from the 1850s. Both companies also built houses for individual families as well. It is these individual families' houses and their occupants; however that significantly differentiate between Westbrook's two sets of industries and their workers. These factors reflect on differing econometrics of the industries, managerial philosophies of the owners, and also, upon the cultural characteristics of the workers.

Around 1881, Westbrook Manufacturing built housing for forty-two Scottish weavers who were recruited to operate looms, also imported from Scotland, for its newly opened gingham mill. These houses were built on an elevated portion of land north of Brown Street to which the place name Scotch Hill became attached. This type of housing appears to have been an exception to the general custom of Westbrook's textile manufacturers, which subscribed to the common practice throughout New England, as described by one author on the subject, Paul McGouldrich:

"As is well known, the original Lowell companies constructed worker housing, donated funds for churches and school houses, and established a hospital for employees. After the 1830s however, such outlays became increasingly discretionary, because of the growth of towns and the changing sex and ethnic composition of the labor force."

Although Westbrook textile manufacturing appeared some thirty years later than the Lowell model and in much smaller scale, the pattern appears much the same. McGouldrich further states, "...after 1850 there are few records of any new textile firms building housing for employees...as rental returns were considerably below the average rate of profit." Apparently decisions pertaining to the deployment of capital in the Westbrook textile industries were directed at areas of greater return than worker housing.

McGouldrich refers to the sex and ethnicity of the textile workers as another factor in the management's decision to not to provide housing. In the textile mills of Westbrook after 1870, these workers were predominately female French Canadians. As will be shown, French Canadians generally eschewed company housing if alternatives were available. Mill owners were also reluctant to provide for the moral and physical needs of French Canadian women as they had been for female Yankee mill operatives decades before.

Records indicate that the first French Canadian came to Westbrook in 1854. No significant numbers of French Canadians immigrated into the area until after the Civil War. Three peak waves of migration from Quebec into New England have been documented, 1865-1873, 1880-1883, and 1890-1893 which resulted in 350,000 immigrants taking up permanent residence. In Maine, in the towns of Biddeford, Lewiston, Waterville, and Brunswick, which all were the sites of large scale textile manufacturing, French Canadian populations grew to be a significant percentage of the total, ranging from 45% to 62% in those places by 1900.

The French Canadians who immigrated came largely from an agrarian background. Poor agricultural conditions, an unusually high birthrate, and few local industrial alternatives caused large numbers of these people to move to New England to seek the stability of work in the mills. They were aided in this translocation by the relative proximity of available employment in many New England towns and by the opening of the Grand Trunk railroad. As these immigrants came to places like Westbrook, they brought with them a set of cultural characteristics which shaped their lifestyle and community organization.

In his study of the French Canadians of Lewiston, James Hill Parker describes some of these cultural attributes and describes how they manifested themselves in the way that French Canadians adapted to life in New England. Parker specifies five aspects of French culture that are most significant: education, social mobility, familism, cultural stability, and experience in textiles. These factors both aided and hindered their adaptation to their new environment.

In Parker's view, the arduousness of life in the primarily rural society from which most of the French Canadians came was a major contributing determinant in the development of their culture. They managed to produce only marginal earnings from agriculture while at the same time propagating large numbers of children. Women produced their own cloth and clothing at home. Schools did not exist in great numbers in rural Quebec, the local priest served as the intellectual leader within the community. Consequently, children worked at an early age at home and in the fields. Deprivation and hard work marked their lives.

Yet, this lack of material wealth was overshadowed by other aspects of life. The community was strongly egalitarian with little variation in wealth and living standard. A strong social organization of extended families and neighborhoods along with the Catholic church and parochial school provided stability and security. Social mobility was not a very important cultural objective. There was little interest in the attainment of higher levels of material wealth through education or separation from the constancy of the community.

As French Canadians moved into places like Lewiston and Westbrook, argues Parker, they brought with them a highly developed and stable culture which they valued and derived intrinsic satisfaction from. They were strongly committed to their language, religion, and themselves. As Parker states" *"French culture was viewed as valuable in its own right and appeared to satisfy needs for social acceptance, social esteem, self-esteem and personal growth unusually well, thus reducing motivation to seek a 'better life'."*

Given their cultural predisposition to maintaining strong community relationships, the low value given to social mobility, and experience in domestic textile production, it follows that the French Canadians who came to Westbrook would settle primarily in the area closest to the cotton and silk mills at Saccarappa in and around Brown Street, establishing a sense of extended family within the neighborhood. The fact that they lived primarily in privately owned, inexpensive, and in some cases, dilapidated, housing may be explained by the lack of housing provided by the mills, the low wages that the workers received, and the workers desire to maintain their own cultural practices, resisting those of the mill owners. Parker likens this behavior to the psychoanalytic term "passive aggressive", there was not so much a hostile rejection of foreign influences as a passive ignoring of them.

The French Canadian population continued to grow in Westbrook to the point in the late 1870s when the community was able to support the building of the first French Catholic church, St. Hyacinthe, on Brown street, completed in 1879. With this influx of immigrants, the community's territory began to enlarge and encroach on the adjacent Scotch Hill, causing the dislocation of previously established communities of Yankee, Irish, and Scotch workers, creating tension and arousing ethnic animosity. The enduring moniker for the area now known as "Frenchtown" became established.

The French Canadian community was not totally without choice in terms of employment or housing in Westbrook. At the other end of Brown Street, S.D. Warren Paper had a long established practice of hiring French Canadians and offered its workers a large array of housing options. Warren had recruited, through agents, some of the first French Canadian workers to come to Westbrook. One local tale within the French community is that of a flood on the Presumpscot that caused the collapse of a section of the river frontage, obstructing the flow of water to the mill. Agents were sent to Canada to find laborers to clear the river. After completing the work, some men stayed on in Westbrook. Single women were also employed at the mill, primarily engaged in sorting rags and counting paper. It is reasonable to assume that some of these workers were French, since there was little resistance amongst French Canadians to having women work. French Canadian men with skills in lumbering and mechanics also found employment at the mill.

S. D. Warren, the mill owner who was a proponent of what might be termed welfare capitalism, provided the housing for a significant portion of his workers in Cumberland Mills. During the initial period of his ownership, he required the workers to live in the company boarding houses unless they lived at home, and failure to abide by the house regulations was cause for dismissal. He later embarked on a building campaign of individual housing that eventually lead him to own fifty percent of the housing units in the village.

(This is a partial excerpt from Levy's work. The complete paper with footnotes is available at the WHSociety



The Night the Mill Went Out

Article by Roger C. Williams in archives

Westbrook – Furious Floods! Death and Disaster from Raging Water..Tremendous Damage Done at Cumberland Mills...s. D. Warren Company alone Loses nearly a Million...The 1895 Mill undermined and Left a Complete Wreck...Nearly Every Bridge Along the Presumpscot Gone.

So read the headlines on Monday, March 2, 1896.

With heavy, winter snows still on the ground, a warm flooding rain started Sunday and continued through Monday night, raising the ice-packed Presumpscot to disastrous flood levels.

“There was not as much water flowing as on some former occasions, notably in 1843, the reporter wrote, but the conditions on the stream may have been so changed since then as to prevent an easy flow of water now. In the first place, the paper mills had erected two mills directly across the stream, making it inevitable that in a great flood the water would be held back.”

In telling of the flood damage, the reporter referred to “the mammoth mills of the S. D. Warren Company, the most extensive paper mills in the world”.

In describing the buildup of flood pressures, he wrote in the somewhat enviable and certainly vivid newspaper style of the day: “The accumulation of ice and wood at the Maine Central Railroad Mountain Division Bridge soon began to affect that structure, and by noon it was seen to be started from its foundation. Very slowly and gradually it gave way, until about 6:15 last night when darkness covered the scene and only a few venturesome onlookers were out, it went downstream with a crash, it took with it, as a matter of course, the town

bridge at Cumberland Mills, the tramway bridge, and the newest mill, known as the '95 mill, which spanned the river just below the tramway. Men who were in the vicinity say that the crash of falling walls, as the mill went down, was something terrific to hear. The lower floors of this monstrous plant, covering as it does acres of land, were full of running water, and this morning presented a sight that never could be forgotten. Expensive machinery covered with masses of ice and poplar wood, mud to the depth of several inches, pieces of timber and wreckage of all sorts everywhere.”

Another vivid description reads: “Then the Cumberland Street Bridge was the next obstruction that went by the board like so much tissue paper. Then came the double-deck tramway bridge of the Warren mills, and then the whole outfit was smashed against the No. 1 machine room, smashing its walls and filling the mill with ice, wood and filth in a depth of twenty feet.”

Such can be the penalty industry pays for locations on the banks of rivers. But out of such disasters have come the concept of providing a flood “safety valve” in the form of a flash dam at the head of a “freshet channel”.

When the Warren Company rebuilt the mill after the 1896 flood, they constructed the flash dam and

freshet channel. The freshet channel is a 63-foot wide “artificial river” which cuts through the mill to carry away flood water when the flash dam at its head goes out.

The wooden flash dam, which rises three feet four and a half inches above the stone dam structure to maintain the mill pond at normal level, is designed to “break” or “flow out” whenever the water behind it reaches a dangerous level. It can also be “tripped

out” by pulling cables to yank out the beams supporting it.

The flash dam has gone out many times since it was built.

Actual loss in the great flood of 1896 may have been more than a million dollars. In addition to the damage to the mill, it was several weeks before full production was restored.

THE REVEREND CALEB BRADLEY

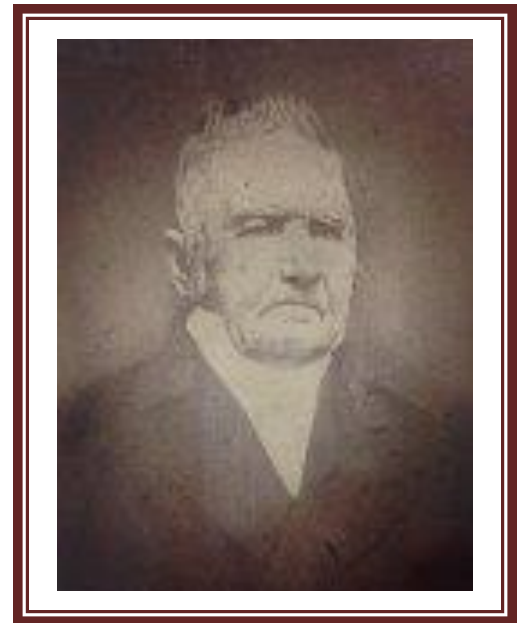
Our faithful editor of the web site, Donna Conley, tried to track down information on the Reverend Caleb Bradley, who was once pastor of the 1st Church of the Parish which was built around 1767 at the corner of Capisic Street and Stevens Avenue. Not much was readily available, but an extensive search turned up a few tidbits on the gentleman. The Reverend, a 1795 graduate of Harvard, was ordained as pastor of the church in October of 1799, and held that post until 1829. During those years he married 550 couples and officiated in 1400 funerals, not receiving a fee for one of these until he was 76, so reported one article.

Although local articles praised him as he often walked many miles to administer to his flock. However, further research revealed a different story. He was married three times, if research is correct: first to Susanna Smith, a daughter of Capt. John Smith of Staughton MA, secondly to “the widow Partridge”, and also to Abigail Loring Codman, widow of Capt. Codman of Gorham. Rev. Bradley, or Father Bradley, lived in Bradley’s Corner in Stroudwater.

He was once described as “a man of pronounced individuality”. In a reference about Nathaniel Hawthorne who in December 1818 was sent to Reverend Bradley’s school in Stroudwater. Stroudwater was a rural crossroads with tanbark-paved streets, its houses sitting high above the Fore and Stroudwater Rivers. This article goes on to say Reverend Bradley was an unpleasant person – his autobiographical sketch reveals his stinginess. He complained of insufficient compensation for his military service and of modern day Sabbath schools. After he wed his second wife, Widow Partridge, he joked, “I married this old Partridge myself”.

Nathaniel did not enjoy his time at the Reverend Bradley’s, but he used story material from his stay at Stroudwater. He immortalized the stinginess of the household by describing the cold parlor, around whose tan-bark fire the minister’s family sat in the darkness in “A Vision of the Fountain”, a story about a boy who is boarding with a minister’s family.

The complete article may be found in our Web Site at www.westbrookhistoricalsociety.org.



Many thanks to Donna Conley for the fantastic job she has done maintaining this site for over ten years and would like to find someone to take over the job. Please contact the Society at info@westbrookhistoricalsociety.org if you have any interest in working on this project.

President's Message

As summer fades into fall it is time to get back together and carry on the mission of the Historical Society.

I hope everyone had a great summer and I look forward to seeing you at the society. We have some interesting programs planned for the upcoming months and we are continuing to receive new acquisitions. I want to thank the Cornelia Warren Foundation and Saco & Biddeford Savings Institute for their generous donations towards materials for our new bookcases that the Westbrook School Department is building for us. The total cost of materials was estimated at \$2,600.00. I reached out for donations to cover this cost and both organizations generously gave us \$1,300.00 donations. I also want to thank the Westbrook School Department for volunteering to build these bookcases for us at no cost. The new bookcases will be used to shelve the Eleanor Conant Saunders Collection of 212 scrapbooks and replace some of our older bookcases.

Once again I want to thank Donna Conley for maintaining our web site, Martha Brackett for the great job she is doing with our newsletter, Tom Clarke for his work as our Treasurer and all our regular volunteers that faithfully work every Tuesday and Saturday to help us carry on our mission.

The Westbrook Historical Society continues to be a great organization because of our volunteers and others that are interested in preserving our past for future generations.

Mike Sanphy, President

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Officers: President- Mike Sanphy , Vice President- Roberta Wyer Dutton Morrill , Secretary- Ellen Burrill, Treasurer- Tom Clarke **Open Saturday and Tuesday mornings from 9 am to noon.**
Our website: www.westbrookhistoricalsociety.org – gives a fascinating outline of the Collections, Research Library and Exhibitions of the Society.

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