

The Ironworks in Middleton, Massachusetts

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CONSIDERING the extensive preservation of historical material in Essex County and the minutely detailed accounts in its local histories, it would hardly seem as if that area could hold any surprises. But all kinds of exciting things, not so much in the field of political events as in the everyday life of the people, have happened there and been forgotten. This is particularly true of Middleton, that little-known corner between Andover, Boxford, Topsfield, and Salem Village (Danvers), that was set off from the four towns as a separate parish in 1727.

The people of Middleton were known in Salem as "the farmers," and so they were, but on a generous scale, with homesteads of hundreds of acres. No one seems to have known what else they were doing, but actually they practiced every trade known to a civilized community and ran mills on every stream.

In 1700, only forty years past the first settler stage, the village lay almost hidden in the virgin forest. The Ipswich River, fed by numerous rushing brooks, wound through and about it. There were no real roads, only Indian trails or such paths as a man might follow on horseback, through the dense woods of pine and great oaks.

The earliest arrivals were familiar with the remarkable iron industry on the Saugus River. While they worked at lumbering and making barrel staves and clapboards, their minds were fixed hopefully on the discovery of iron ore. Bray Wilkins, who came from Lynn in the 1650's with a large grown-up family, had bought six hundred acres from Gov-

ernor Bellingham, with the express understanding that if iron were found on the land, he would pay a further compensation annually. A few years later a blacksmith, Thomas Fuller, was invited to come from Woburn, with the idea, it is said, of running an ironworks. This he never did, but he and his several sons saw to it that such bar iron as could be obtained in the vicinity was converted into tools and plowshares.

Fuller got some of his iron from Boxford (Rowley Village), where the Leonards, who had been employed at Saugus, were in charge of the actual production in a venture plagued by fires and lawsuits that was carried on fitfully during the 1670's.

There appears to have been no other such activity of importance in the seventeenth century, but in 1708 the business of refining iron began again in the part of Boxford that later became Middleton. It is strange that an industry which was certainly outside the ken of simple farmers should nevertheless have been founded by husbandmen and carried on without a break for over seventy years.

On June 8, 1708, Francis Eliot of Boxford, a yeoman, conveyed for four shillings to Thomas Flint, Sr., and Thomas Flint, Jr., both of Salem, John How of Boxford, and Thomas Cave, Jr., of Topsfield, "so much of my land and water courses as shall be needful or anyways necessary for the abovesd . . . to set their Damm on for their Iron work and also to flow with water so much of my land adjoining to their pond as they shall need for the benefit of their Iron works or water works and

that from time to time so long as they shall keep said works up or in repair."

All of these men lived within the present bounds of Middleton. Francis Eliot's land extended south and southwest of the proposed site and he lived near the present junction of Mill and Liberty Streets. John How was the son of Captain John How, who had been concerned in the earlier Boxford works, and he was a brother-in-law of Thomas Cave, whose sister Sarah he had married in 1697. He too had a large farm on Liberty Street, but much farther north. Cave lived in what was then the southern part of Topsfield. Both he and How acquired further acreage near the ironworks. The Flints had very extensive holdings—as much as one thousand acres at one time, it is said—in the western part of town, then Salem Village, and in Reading.

Captain Thomas Flint, the father, was a millwright and may have been the instigator of the scheme. Undoubtedly he built the dam and the sluiceway of great stones, which is still in place. We may suppose, however, that he had the assistance of the other proprietors. The ironworks was situated on the south side of Pout Pond Brook, just west of the point where the stream runs under Mill Street. The pond created by the building of the dam is still a sizable body of water.

The brook was called the "Ironworks Brook" as early as February, 1712. Just when the first buildings were erected we do not know, but they are referred to in a deed dated July 19, 1715. Before that time other figures had entered the picture. Deacon Edward Putnam, Sr., and his son Edward became shareholders, and they, with Thomas Cave, later built the "New house—for Coal," and "the house where the Chimney is" later noted

in the Deacon's will. In a deed in 1731 Putnam says that he bought a one-sixth share from Captain Thomas Flint. It seems likely that Captain Flint at the outset had a one-half interest in the enterprise, for, when he died May 24, 1721, he left "all my shares in the Iron works" to his sons Thomas and Samuel. This bequest appears in a codicil to his will written two days before his death.

Flint may have had some experience as a very young man (he was born in 1650) at the Saugus works. He was at least acquainted with Samuel Jenks, who sold him a piece of salt marsh. Flint was the only person in the Middleton company who could have had practical knowledge of the kind.

In 1721, then, the company consisted of Thomas and Samuel Flint, the two Putnams, How, and Cave. How's name does not appear after the first organization and he may have disposed of his shares. The Flints also cannot be traced as owners thereafter. Somewhat later we find that Francis Eliot was a proprietor and he may have been so from the beginning. His generosity in selling a mill privilege for four shillings may be thus explained. After his death in 1739, an inventory of his possessions mentions:

To Part of an Iron Works	40-00-00
To Iron Bars & a Scieth &	
Scieth Tackling	4-10-00
To Four hundred of new Iron	
	16-00-00

Daniel Kenney was probably another early proprietor, for his land adjoined the site of the works. He had acquired property in the vicinity as early as 1704 and in 1720 became the sole owner of the house and farm which he had previously shared with his brother Jonathan. Kenney was a mason. On October 25, 1744, he sold his one-sixth share to his

son Israel, who was a blacksmith. When Israel died three years later, his inventory, dated June 29, 1747, mentions "One Sixth part of an Iron mill 7: 10: 0."

The ironworks in Middleton was conveniently placed near Pout Pond meadow

was deeply pitted, as if digging had been done there. The area is now rather thickly wooded, but no doubt in the days of ironworking it was deforested in order to make the tremendous quantities of charcoal that were necessary for the forge.



FIG. 1. SLUICWAY AT DAM ON POUT POND BROOK, MILL STREET, MIDDLETON, MASSACHUSETTS, RELATED PRESUMABLY TO THE OLD IRONWORKS, 1708-1793

Photograph by Leo Litwin, 1956.

—an area of low land lying along the brook, where almost everyone in town had some rights for the purpose of cutting turf, or peat. It was the kind of terrain where bog iron could be dug, and the evidence indicates that the company did not have to seek further for their supply of "mine." Some years ago the pond was drained, and a neighbor, Arthur E. Curtis, noticed that the bottom

This works was operated simply as a bloomery, i.e., it prepared iron by the direct process. The bog ore was pounded by a triphammer into blooms, or round batches, and then submitted to intense heat in the forge until impurities were eliminated. It was then hammered by hand into bars convenient for blacksmiths' use.

This operation required special skill

and knowledge beyond that of the ordinary ironworker or blacksmith, so it is not surprising to find that the first bloomer whose name occurs in records was a complete stranger in town. In fact, he is still a stranger, for extensive research has told us little about him. He first appears June 1, 1731, when Edward Putnam, Sr., sold to "Joseph Steel, now Residing in Middleton, a Bloomer, and Timothy Fuller of Middleton, yeoman, for £30, All my Sixth Part of the Iron Works now standing in Middleton abovesd on the Brook called Pout-Pond-Brook. That is The part which I bought of Capt. Thomas Flint And the above named Joseph Steel and Timothy Fuller, to pay all the Damage that shall arise by Flowing, according to what shall be laid upon sd works, in proportion with the rest of the Owners of sd works, And the Rent that is due to Thomas Cave, my sixth part of all that is to be paid to Him and others. And the abovesd Edward Putnam Senr to Give all my Right Title and Interest, being one sixth part of the Works, House, hamer, Anvil, and Bellows and all other Utensils, with the sixth part of the Stream and Lands and all priviledges and Appurtenances thereto belonging or anyways appertaining in Partnership with the Partners thereto belonging."

This was the prelude to an event that occurred on August 2 of the same year, when Steel married Sarah Putnam, daughter of Edward, Jr. In the following year he was of Rowley, and still called "bloomer," when, on May 6, he sold his newly acquired twelfth part of the ironworks back to his father-in-law. In 1735 Steel and his wife were back in Middleton, where four of their children were born between 1735 and 1745. Since this man was so closely connected

with the works, it seems evident that he was conducting the bloomery during this decade and perhaps earlier.

Up to this time, records contain little information about the operation or relative success of the works. One little item was gleaned some fifty years ago by George Francis Dow, who headed it, "The Bursting of the Dam at the Boxford Iron Works." It was a paragraph from the *Boston News Letter* of October 1, 1725:

"The foregoing Account demonstrates that Water is a bad master and brings to remembrance the Vanity and Vexation of the Spirit, with which the Owners of the Iron Works at Topsfield were exercised. They made a strong Dam to dispose of the Water for their Service. But it pass'd over the firm land beside the Dam which was not discerned, or not seasonably guarded against; Presently after, it insinuated itself under the Turff, and then it rushed with such Violence as to throw down the Trees, and conquer all opposition; it quickly forced a large & deep Channel. And the Owners were put to the sore travel of making a second Dam, or else the first tho' standing, had stood to no purpose."

The writer was incorrect in saying that the ironworks was in Topsfield—there was nothing of the kind there in 1725—but Mr. Dow was right in calling it the Boxford ironworks, as it was until 1727.

Isaac Kenney and his younger brother Israel, born in 1712, both of whom were blacksmiths, were no doubt active in the practical business of the manufacture. Isaac learned the art of blooming and took over when Steel left off. He was called "bloomer" when he signed a note as security for Israel on February 25, 1746. Isaac Kenney lived on the

farm deeded to him by his father, Daniel, in 1735, the father keeping half the house, barn, and orchard during his lifetime. This house was built before 1720, when Daniel took title to it. When Isaac died in 1798, he was living in the house shown in Fig. 2. It was intended to accommodate two families as was the first homestead, and may or may not be the original structure. Known locally as the "old Kinney house," it burned to the ground in the 1920's.

In 1734 Edward Putnam, Jr., sold to Thomas Cave an acre and a half of land and his "one sixth part of an Iron Works standing on the forsaid pout pond brook. Also One Sixth part of the Stream Hammer Anvil & Bellows with the Sixth part of all the utensils belonging to the sd Iron works." On December 1, 1736, Edward Putnam (probably Edward, Jr.) conveyed thirteen acres of land on the "East or Southwardly side of Pout Pond Brook near the Iron works" to Edward Nichols for £110. With this land he sold one-twelfth part of the works with all equipment, tools, and the materials "for the Use of sd Works with one twelfth part of the Work House and a Coal House which was Ezra Putnam's." This appears to be the share that Putnam bought of Joseph Steel.

Ezra Putnam was Edward, Jr.'s brother. His father in a will dated March 11, 1731, devised to him "my share in the Iron works and that New house that I built for Coal. I also give him my share of that house where the Chimney is That I and Thomas Cave & my son Edward built." Deacon Putnam did not die until 1748. Meantime, three months after writing the will, he had sold his sixth share to Fuller and Steel. It is not clear how Ezra obtained his title to a share.

Edward Nichols was a miller who

operated a gristmill farther up the stream, where Liberty Street now crosses it. He had, of course, damned the brook, and that led to the necessity of an agreement with the proprietors of the ironworks. A deposition, entered at the Essex County Registry of Deeds, shows how the matter was settled:

Sept. 5, 1738.

Deposition of Joseph Knight, aged 54 years who testifieth—that some years past he was called to be a witness of an agreement between Thomas Cave and Edward Nicholls both of Middleton—Agreement was that sd Nicholls should proceed to finish his Mill that was erected and to make a Dam to Raise Water for said Mill and promis'd that he would not Disturb or Molest him (Nichols) paying him (Cave) the damage yearly in case they could not agree—it should be left to Mr. Thorndike Procter of Salem to determine what Damages were—Joseph Knight.

John Nichols, aged seventy-one years, testified to truth of above.

Records show little about what occurred at the works during the next twenty-two years, but there is no question that it was in operation. Tradition says that it was run by Thomas Cave and the Kenneys, and for once tradition seems to be right. Israel Kenney died in 1747, leaving his share to his infant son Israel. Whether Isaac Kenney owned an interest at that time is uncertain. The Putnams and other early proprietors were out of it by then, and it is probable that Thomas Cave gradually acquired the shares of Nichols and Eliot, until by 1760 he was to all intents and purposes the sole owner, with Isaac Kenney and his young sons, Asa and Simeon, running the works. Timothy Fuller alone never relinquished his rights in the business.

On March 15, 1760, Thomas Cave, who was then eighty years old, sold the works with ten acres of land to Kenney.

I quote the deed almost in full, as it determines the exact location of the iron-works.

I Thomas Cave of Middleton . . . yeoman, for and in consideration of one hundred and thirty-three pounds, six shillings and eight pence Lawfull Money to me in hand well and Truly Paid by Isaac Kenney of the same

of the said Nickils thence Northly and Westaly by the Land of Bangamin Nickols to the Upland of the said Cave thenc Northestly & Estly by the Upland of the said Cave to the North ende of the Iron works Dame thence East about three Poles to a Stake and Stons thenc Southwardly by the Rode to the . . . bounds first mensied. Likewise an Iron works standing on the said Premises.

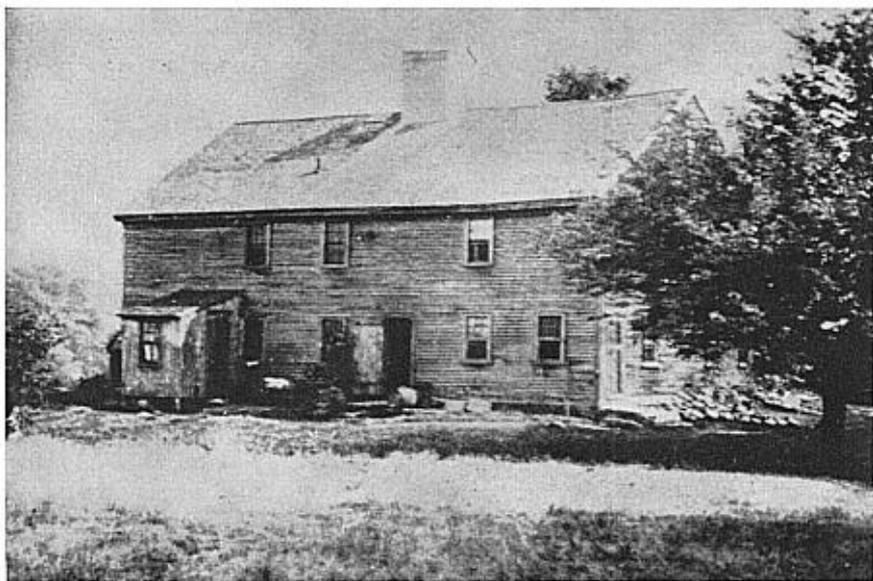


FIG. 2. HOME OF ISAAC KENNEY, "BLOOMER" AND "BLACKSMITH,"
MIDDLETON, MASSACHUSETTS
From an early photograph.

Town County and Province aforesaid Bloomer . . . have bargained and Sold . . . and forever confairm unto him the said Isaac Kenney . . . a Sartain Peace or Parscell of Upland medow and Swamp Land containing by Estimation about Teen Ekers . . . in Middleton . . . bounded as followeth beginning at a Stake and Stons aboute it and standing by the Brige on the South Side of a Brook known by the name of Poute Pond Brook near the Iron works & frome said bounds westerly to the Ende of a Stone waall Standing on the South side of the Iron works and by the Land of Bengam Nickols thence Southwesterly as the waall now stands to a Wallnut tree Marked by the Land

From this time on the enterprise was in the hands of the Kenneys. Isaac was then fifty-five years old. He was evidently a husky man, as might be expected of one accustomed to such hard labor; it was more than thirty years later, when he was eighty-six, that he thought of making a will, and he lived for five years after that. It is quite possible that he pursued his activities until he was well past seventy. Assuming that he was able to do so until he was seventy-five, we may

reasonably deduce that the Middleton ironworks was in operation up to 1780, or more than seventy years. Asa and Simeon Kenney were always termed "blacksmiths" and there is no indication that they kept the refinery going, although they may have done so.

When Isaac Kenney made his will, November 28, 1793, he devised to his son Simeon all his real estate and buildings in Middleton and Andover and "Land at the eastward," wearing apparel, farming utensils, pew in the northeast corner of the meetinghouse, and "all my Right and Title to the Iron works in Middleton if not sold before."

Obviously, the ironworks buildings were still standing in 1793. They were not sold by Isaac. Already, no doubt, they were in a dilapidated condition and ready to collapse. By 1797 they had done so. The inventory of the possessions of Timothy Fuller mentions under date of January 2, 1797, "a Privilege in the Stream where the Ironworks formerly stood a hammer and Anvil \$5."

Isaac Kenney died in the following year, and the history of this industry would seem to be concluded. But, like a ghost, a little story has come down to us. In 1891, Mrs. Martha J. Averill, of Middleton, a meticulous investigator, interviewed an old man named Andrew Gould, who was a nephew of Thomas Cave's grandson Sylvester. Gould told her that when he was fourteen years old (1820), Sylvester Cave sold the anvil

and the triphammer of the ironworks to a peddler for some pots and pans. Cave was never well off and was supported by the town in his later years. One can picture him rummaging in the debris of the old works in the hope of finding something salable. Apparently he had no idea of the value of so many hundreds of pounds of iron.

Andrew Gould raised another ironworks ghost in the form of a dog—a dog that had been trained to go after cider for the relief of the thirsty ironworkers.

The disappearance of the triphammer makes it unlikely that any excavation that might be undertaken along Pout Pond Brook would reveal anything of interest. Slag is still plentiful near the present dam—in fact, it seems to have been used as a fill for it. The curved spillway, built of very large stones or boulders, is thought to be a part of the original structure and has a side channel for the accommodation of the shaft of a water wheel. The spot is now a picturesque place with a grove of pines and ought to be marked in some way as the site of an early and long-lived industry.

SOURCES

- Essex County Deeds and Probate Records.
- Essex Quarterly Court Records.
- Middleton Vital Records.
- Martha J. Averill Manuscripts, Vols. I and II.
- Martha J. Averill Genealogical and Historical Notes.
- Historical Collections of the Topsfield Historical Society*, Vol. XIII, p. 22.