

Concord's "Factory Village": 1776 - 1862

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In 1635, when the town bounds of Concord, Massachusetts were surveyed, the southwest corner of the town was established where it still remains. The area around the bound changed tremendously, however, particularly in the last quarter of the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries.

Like so many other New England villages, Concord's outlying areas were natural forests interspersed with open meadows, often watered by fairly swift streams. The Assabet River, on whose banks Concord's "Factory Village" grew, was described in 1792 as

... remarkable for its current, which by the eye is scarcely perceivable. At low water mark it is from a hundred to two hundred feet wide, and from three to twelve feet deep . . . in the spring [it] covers the neighboring meadows, which are very extensive.¹

The early history of the Assabet River and "Factory Village" is one of frustration and failure. Like so many other manufacturing complexes, "Factory Village" was begun in the early nineteenth century on foundations established in the mid-seventeenth century. The Iron Works Farm, a branch of the Saugus Iron Works, owned some four hundred acres along the river in Concord, as well as twelve hundred more in Acton. Due to the lack of water power this operation lasted less than forty years; by 1700 the southwest corner of Concord had settled into a sleepy pattern of rural farming.

Roger Brown, a "clothier" from Framingham, bought a small piece of land on the east bank of the Assabet River in 1776.² Brown's father had operated a full-

ing mill in Framingham for several years, and this purchase of land was soon followed by others, calculated to establish a farm and a fulling operation in Concord. By 1786 Roger Brown, listed in the deed as a "Gentleman," had purchased enough land to actually build his fulling mill. Its appearance and dimensions are unknown, although it stood on "... a small island in North River lying against the Premises . . .," the "Premises" being Roger Brown's house. If Brown's house, which still stands, is any indication of his taste, then the fulling mill was simple and straightforward, even conservative — not unusual for a farmer in a small outlying district. More important for "Factory Village" was the fact that Roger Brown's choice of location established a precedent for mill buildings which endures to this day.³

John Brown, a son of Roger and Mary (Hartwell) Brown, was born in his father's house in 1783. In 1806 his father sold him a triangular piece of land to the northeast of his own house. John Brown did not build upon this lot until just before his marriage in October, 1812. Meanwhile he set about developing some of the potential of his father's fulling mill. Roger Brown sold one-third of the interest in his fulling mill to his son in the spring of 1806. Within eighteen months the young Brown approached his first cousin Ephraim Hartwell of New Ipswich, New Hampshire about forming a partnership to build a cotton mill on the Assabet River.⁴

Hartwell was born between Concord and Lincoln, on the town line. He moved to New Ipswich about 1782. (He owned at one time the Barr/Barrett house in New

Ipswich, which is presently owned by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities.) An active participant in town life, he was elected to town and state offices for nearly thirty years. He was also a Trustee in the Act of Incorporation for the New Ipswich Academy, a proprietor and constant donor to it, and to the town library. He was not only a merchant, but also owned a scythe factory and the first linseed oil mill in New Ipswich. As early as 1785 Hartwell had extended his investments into Massachusetts by making an agreement with Aaron Brown of Groton to set up a store.⁵

Hartwell, then, was the natural man for John Brown to approach. Although Hartwell was considerably older than Brown, the partnership was carried on enthusiastically. By December 7, 1809 a cotton factory existed on the site in Concord, along with a fulling mill and clothier's shop belonging to Roger Brown, and a grist mill owned by another local farming family. Across the lane from the cotton factory stood a house "lately built" by Hartwell and Brown for housing their tenants.⁶

The cotton factory itself was a wooden building one hundred feet long and twenty eight feet wide. It was situated over a raceway on its long axis and had a tower on the "Road" side. It was five stories high including the basement.⁷ The Hartwell and Brown company did not quickly change the character of the area around the factory; an 1811 deed from Roger Brown to the factory owners reveals the persistence of an agrarian economy. In selling land to the company, Roger Brown retained the privilege "to reserve a cartway through said land with shutting gates or putting up bars as has before been used as such . . ." ⁸ "Factory Village" had retained the century-old farming tradition.

Gradually Hartwell and Brown bought

surrounding land from other families, including two sons of Ezra Conant, a local farmer who sold Roger Brown his first piece of land in 1776. Both sons had moved away — one to New Hampshire, the other to Vermont.

Ephraim Hartwell was in his sixties when he entered into the partnership agreement with John Brown. He must have desired to gradually relinquish control of his business interests to those whom he loved and trusted, for on April 19, 1813 he and John Brown sold to Ephraim Hartwell Bellows of Concord, "one undivided third part of a certain tract of land with a cotton manufactory situated thereon," as well as "one tract of land with a dwelling-house standing thereon opposite said factory."⁹ Bellows was one of twelve children of Caleb and Mary (Hartwell) Bellows. Adopted by his maternal grandfather Ephraim Hartwell while still a child, he was educated at the New Ipswich Academy. The fact that Bellows is listed as a resident of Concord, rather than New Ipswich, is probably a result of his grandfather's desire that he try out the situation to make sure that it suited him before he assumed any responsibility for the factory's management.

Such a position must have looked promising indeed to a young man just starting out. The War of 1812 raised tariffs on British textiles and lessened the competition for American cloth. During the war, with a ready market for their product, Brown and Bellows seem to have been successful partners. But shortly after the war, Brown (who like his father had become a "Gentleman") quitclaimed his interests in the cotton factory to Caleb Bellows. The deed, dated July 14, 1817, may have reflected a growing concern that the mill ownership be consolidated on a more secure footing. On April 12, 1820, Caleb

and Ephraim Hartwell Bellows mortgaged a portion of their cotton factory to Samuel Billings & Company of Boston. In return for a one-third interest in the company Samuel Billings agreed to "supply the sd Ephraim H. Bellows and Co. with Cotton or as much as will be necessary for the sd Ephraim H. Bellows & Co. to spin in their Factory in Concord at a fair price . . ." ¹⁰ Billings also agreed to sell the mill's finished products, thus forming between Billings and Bellows a perfect economic symbiotic relationship.

In 1820 Bellows returned the questionnaire sent out as part of the Federal Government's Fourth Census Manufacturing Schedules. Bellows reported that his factory building contained "8 cards [carding machines], 8 drawings [drawing frames], 3 roping cans, 10 Frames 48 Spindles each, 1 mule, 180 spindles, [and] 1 twisting Jenny 52 spindles." The cotton, cleansed of seeds before it arrived at the mill, was combed on the "cards" and loosely spun on the "drawings." It was more tightly spun into a finished cotton yarn on the twisting jenny. This yarn was then probably let out to local families where it was woven on hand looms. It is significant that in the early 1820's cotton supplanted flax, long a product locally grown and used for fine shirting, dress-cloth, and bed and table linens. That the cotton mill was small (although probably of a typical size by contemporary standards) is indicated by the inclusion of figures for factory workers: six men, two women, and twenty boys and girls, whose total wages for a year were listed as \$2,000 — less than a quarter of what Bellows spent on obtaining cotton to be processed. Bellows echoed the sentiment of other New England mill owners in lamenting: "This establishment was commenced in the year 1808 and was prosperous until the commencement of the year 1816

since which to the present year [1820] the business has been extremely dull and for 1 1/2 years were obliged to stop business . . ." ¹¹

Caleb Bellows died in the spring of 1823. His interest was purchased by his son at public auction "in consideration of the sum of two thousand dollars." ¹² Besides the factory and surrounding land and buildings several pieces of property were listed which were at some distance from the "Village" complex. These were woodlots, needed by Bellows because he must have been responsible for heating his factory and any of the "Dwelling Houses" which were being used by tenant factory workers. An inventory of the factory furnishings made in 1824 included several stoves. ¹³ "Stove & funnell," listed with other tools, was probably in the "Dressing & Dye House." A "Sheetiron Stove & funnell" and a "cast iron Stove & funnel" were probably in the main building. Even if they had been at one end of the building, connected to long stove pipes that acted as horizontal heating ducts, it is unlikely that they could have heated all four floors of the mill. It seems clear that the workable space was dependent on the season of the year.

On July 28, 1824 John Brown sold his interest in the factory to Bellows. If Bellows' reply to the 1820 manufacturing census was complete, then a radical shift had taken place in the factory in only four years; an inventory accompanying the 1824 deed included four looms — one a "Sattinett loom." ¹⁴ Rather than letting out the cotton yarn in the factory to local families who wove it into cloth, the operation was now entirely performed within the factory building. This is confirmed by other items listed in the inventory taken at the time of sale, namely "one knaping machine, one Teazeling machine, one Shearing machine, One Shearing board,

[and] one Knapping board." These implements were used in the final finishing of cloth before it was sold, the knapping and teaseling machines to fluff the fibers on the surface, and the shearing machine to closely and uniformly cut them.

Although the deed mentions that both parties were "agreeably agreed" to its terms, Bellows was unable to keep his end of the bargain. A suit brought against Bellows by Brown lasted for a year and a half, until the court finally decided against Bellows.¹⁵ Bellows, unable to pay Brown and yet obliged to pay him by court order, left Concord. While casting about for a lucrative job, he entered into correspondence with Lewis Tappan, then treasurer of the Ware Manufacturing Company in Ware, Massachusetts. Tappan's successor, James C. Dunn, corresponded actively with S.V.S. Wilder, Ware's agent, in choosing Bellows to become the new agent for the company. Wilder wrote:

You are aware that in a short space of 24 hours acquaintance with a man it is impossible always to form a correct estimate of his character, abilities & qualification, but so far as I am able to judge from the little I have seen of and conversed with Mr. Bellows, I give him the decided preference to any other candidate which has yet been talked of as Agent for the establishment . . . [even though] he has been accustomed to run only twenty looms, & to manage only 40 persons, instead of 250 looms, & 400 persons . . .¹⁶

Either Wilder's expectations and impressions were incorrect, or Bellows quickly made enough money to pay John Brown's share in the Concord mill, for he left the Ware Manufacturing Company in less than a year and returned to "Factory Village."

On April 14, 1831, he sold the controlling interest in the Concord factory to Thomas Lord and Elisha Parks, "Commission Merchants" in Boston.¹⁷ The follow-

ing winter the men were granted an Act of Incorporation which limited their real estate value to \$50,000, and personal value to the same.¹⁸ But the three quickly disposed of the operation to James Derby of Exeter, New Hampshire, who bought the "Bellows Lot" for \$12,140.¹⁹ He also bought a tract of land of about two acres on the "south side" of the river across from the factory building. The sale attracted attention as far away as Greenfield, Massachusetts where a local newspaper noted that "an extensive Machine Shop is to be put into immediate operation by Mr. Derby."²⁰ A map dated December 3, 1834 indicates that the machine shop was on the island in the river, adjacent to, and at the rear of, the cotton mill.²¹

The map also shows a brick-ended duplex house built by Derby on the two acres across the river. At least one other duplex mill-owner's house is known, that of Ahab Wilkinson of Willimantic, Connecticut.²² Although the floorplans of the two apartments in Derby's house are identical, the trim, wainscoting and mantelpieces of the southern apartment are slightly more elegant. The brick-ended central section of the house seems to be a conscious imitation of at least two houses which had been built within the previous five years or so in Concord Village. Derby's obvious attempt to establish a prestigious household by copying the style of houses which he must have passed every time he went into Concord Village was tempered by the necessity of having to rent one side of his new house to tenants who worked in his factory. This was not necessarily a contradiction in an age when mill owners and workers often shared the same background and training, and lived closer together than in later years.

Whatever pretensions or ideas Derby

had for his mill property never found expression. The factory proved to be unprofitable and he sold it to Calvin Carver Damon on January 5, 1835.²³ Damon came directly to Concord from Framingham, where he had been associated with the Saxonville mills. His career was similar to Ephraim Hartwell's: the son of a New Hampshire farmer, he became a clerk in a country store and eventually moved to New York City. He became involved in the Saxonville Mills through a friend's father, Abraham Marland. Damon continued in Framingham for several months after he bought the "Factory Village" property in Concord, until the Saxonville mills burned to the ground. He then moved to Concord, and lived in the apartment tenanted formerly by James Derby, until he could buy a separate house. His account book vividly conveys the activities of a small textile mill-owner in the 1830s and 1840s.²⁴ A study of the "New Wheel" account indicates that Damon flourished where others had failed by making a simple improvement — raising the height of the mill dam. He also built a new, more efficient wheel and lined the banks of the tail race with stone coursing.

It was almost a year before he recouped the losses of the Saxonville fire. During this period he relied heavily on the resources of his factory agent James Johnson, of Johnson Sewall & Company. Johnson was his wife's uncle. It was also due to his agent's influence that he changed the mill's product by purchasing new machinery to manufacture flannel. His productivity allowed him to build more mill housing across the river — two four-family structures adjacent to James Derby's brick-ended house. "Factory Village" was busy indeed. William C. Hayward began a new sawmill down river from Damon's cotton factory, which sup-

plied much of the lumber for Damon's new houses. According to his account book, Damon employed many local people, but only a few worked regularly in his mill. John Brown, the former mill owner, did not work for Damon in the mill, but he did "set tire," a wheelwright's task. Besides supplying "molasses & hops for Beer" John W. Rice, a mill-worker, fashioned "Wheel Barrow axletree[s]." In 1837 Calvin Damon reported that his mill had four sets of machinery with 640 spindles that consumed 30,000 pounds of cotton annually — almost four times the amount processed by Bellows seventeen years earlier.²⁵

Damon's prosperity extended to the larger Concord community, for when he died suddenly in 1854 the Unitarian Church at the center of town stood in his debt. Although far more involved than his predecessors in managing his cotton factory, Calvin Damon did not relinquish farming altogether. His probated will lists the contents of house and barns on his "Home Farm." His three executors, all farmers, lumped all items in the house into valuations by rooms. But when they got to the barn they were far more impressed with what they saw — the enumeration of animals, carriages, wagons, and such tools as "6 tined [and] 4 tined Manure Forks" betray the real concerns of the men.²⁶

During Calvin Damon's ownership "Factory Village" assumed a distinct identity. A new highway was laid out in 1842 with the first bridge over the Assabet River built for the convenience of highway users. Traffic patterns changed as this new road (now Route 62) supplanted the "Old Stow Road," which had run to the north of the Assabet River. In 1844 a railroad was laid out with tracks running very close to the factory. As the railroad meant increased access to Boston

for "Factory Village" residents, a library for paying subscribers stocked in an upstairs room of the cotton mill increased their access to a wider intellectual world. Subscribers lived in the village and worked in the mill.²⁷

Upon the death of Calvin Carver Damon, the mill's ownership was in limbo. Operated by Damon's eldest son, Edward Carver Damon, the mill was owned by Damon's wife in trust for her children. Edward Damon consolidated mill operations and in 1859 he commissioned Henry David Thoreau to survey "Damon's Mills."²⁸ Thoreau's map delineated the Damon family's capable management: a new raceway, so carefully documented in Calvin Damon's account book, as well as his two tenant houses, are shown. James Derby's machine shop became a cloth-finishing shop. Extensive drying racks occupied a large space at the rear of the mill. Machine repairs had been relegated to a lean-to added to the back of the mill building itself. Most significantly the survey showed the railroad which supplanted the Union Turnpike.²⁹

Thoreau's *Journal* documents his activities at "Damon's Mills," describing the unusually hot days of May 1859:

It is suddenly very warm and oppressive, especially in the woods with thick clothing . . . My assistants, being accustomed to work indoors in the factory, are quite overcome by this sudden heat . . . Apple in bloom . . . At eve the first spark of a nighthawk.³⁰

Thoreau died just three years after surveying Damon's "Factory Village" property. A few months later, on September 19, 1862, the mill building burned to the ground. Though unrelated, both occurrences were symbolic of the demise of a long-established way of life in "Factory Village." The railroad brought new workers — strangers — to the small community. The Civil War brought prosperity to the brick mill Edward Damon built in 1863 to replace the old wooden building. Both processes had a profound effect on the small village — the landscape succumbed to new housing laid out along the village's Main Street and the workers became inured to a new standardized work schedule. Roger Brown, with his fulling mill and concern for "shutting gates or putting up bars" and John Brown, whose rise from "yeoman" to "gentleman" did not destroy his ability to "set tire" were as obsolete as the small mill built on their land only fifty years earlier.

NOTES

¹ "Topographical Description of Concord," *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society for the year 1792*, Boston, 1806, I, 236, 237.

² Middlesex County (Massachusetts) Deeds, Book 51, 65.

³ See Middlesex County Deeds, Book 84, 30, and Book 85, 430, as well as *Social Circle Memoirs of Charles Edward Brown* (Cambridge, Mass., 1940), 321.

⁴ Middlesex County Deeds, Book 171, 488-489.

⁵ Frederick Kidder, *The History of New Ipswich, from its first grant in MDCCXXXVI to the present time* (Boston, 1852), 118, 160, 175, 198, 200, 202, 210, and 386. Also, "An Agreement between Ephraim Hartwell and Aaron Brown," Barr House Documents, Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities.

⁶ Middlesex County Deeds, Book 208, 208, and Book 208, 210.

⁷ *Social Circle Memoirs of Charles Edward Brown*,

322, and Cyrus Hubbard, "... the Cotton Factory establishment situated in the Westerly part of Concord ... Survey'd Decr the 3rd ..." (ms. map, Concord, 1834, private collection.)

⁸ Middlesex County Deeds, Book 208, 210.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Book 208, 211.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Book 234, 77. One of the witnesses to this deed was Thomas Lord, a later business partner of Bellows.

¹¹ United States, Bureau of the Census, *Fourth Census, 1820, Manufacturing Schedules*, Record Group 29 (Microfilm, Old Sturbridge Village).

¹² Middlesex County Deeds, Book 249, 366.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Book 267, 50.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Middlesex County, Massachusetts, Records of the Supreme Judicial Court, 1823-1826.

¹⁶ S.V.S. Wilder, Letter to James C. Dunn, Esq., Treas. of the Ware Manfg. Co., Ware Manufacturing Co. Letterbook (handwritten ms., Ware, Massachusetts, 1826-1831), 26 July 1827, ms. number 206.1, Merrimack Valley Textile Museum. An extensive correspondence between Wilder and Tappan, Wilder and Dunn, and Bellows and Dunn, exists. Wilder, in urging acceptance of Bellows as new company agent, characterized himself as the "present inefficient agent." Bellows, whose correspondence ends September 1, 1828, seems to have been a bit more efficient, but not interested enough in managing a mill belonging to someone other than himself to have stayed on for more than one year.

¹⁷ Middlesex County Deeds, Book 306, 289.

¹⁸ "An ACT to incorporate the Concord Manufacturing Company," *Private and Special Statutes of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts* (Boston, 1837), V, 163.

¹⁹ Middlesex County Deeds, Book 327, 515-517.

²⁰ *Greenfield Gazette*, October 22, 1833.

²¹ Cyrus Hubbard, "... the Cotton Factory establishment situated in the Westerly part of Concord ... Survey'd Decr the 3rd ..." (ms. map, Concord, 1834, private collection.)

²² In the will of Ahab Wilkinson (a partner with Loring Carpenter in the Willimantic, Connecticut, firm of Carpenter and Wilkinson, 1831-1833), his widow, Elira Wilkinson, "set

out ... her thirds or dower" of Wilkinson's estate as

The west half of the front [illegible] in front of the dwelling house where the sd Ahab Wilkinson deceased last dwelt with the privilege of the front gate, passage and front door in common with the occupants of the east half of said premises, also ... the woodyard, ... a garden in the rear of the house, ... and the west half of the back house in common with other occupants ...

²³ Middlesex County Deeds, Book 337, 450, and the *Concord Freeman* I, 21, Saturday, May 2, 1835.

²⁴ Calvin Carver Damon, Account Books, I and II (mss. written in Framingham and Concord, 1834-1837, and Concord, 1837-1851). Damon utilized the common system of entering expenses under debtor or creditor columns. Although entries are very clear and specific for the first ten years or so of his keeping the books they deteriorate in clarity and specificity during the 1840s when he hired an accountant.

²⁵ John P. Bigelow, *Statistical Tables: Exhibiting the Condition and Products of Certain Branches of Industry in Massachusetts, for the Year Ending April 1, 1837* (Boston, 1838), 26.

²⁶ Administration of Calvin Carver Damon's Estate, Probate Records of Middlesex County, First Series, 30273.

²⁷ "A List of Books in the Factory Village Mutual Library," (ms., Concord, 1843). Over one hundred-fifty titles are listed.

²⁸ The original map is in the possession of a Damon descendant, as are most of the other manuscript sources cited. Actually Thoreau made two maps, of which this is the more detailed of the mill itself. The other map shows the land to the north and east, most of it woodlots, owned by Damon and others.

²⁹ The Union Turnpike, organized March 2, 1804, extended along Concord's Main Street west to within a mile and a half of "Factory Village" which was then the site of Roger Brown's fulling mill.

³⁰ Henry David Thoreau, *Journal*, New York: Dover Publications, 1962, 182. This is a reprint of Thoreau's *Journal* first published in 1906 by Houghton Mifflin, Boston.