

"The Industrial and Social Development of
Boston Street, Salem"

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The first construction in the area of Boston Street appears to have been done by William Traske in 1635.¹ Traske was one of the Old Planters who had been at Naumkeag with Conant and Endicott. Traske was a miller and he gained permission of the Town to construct a corn mill on the North River near the present site of Jeffers Lumber Company.

Traske's investment and construction was industrial in nature. Since that time the Boston Street area has undergone continual industrial use, making it one of the oldest Industrial Zones in the nation.

Traske was followed three years later by Lawrence and Cassandra Southwick, who opened a glass works at the north end of the area in what is now Aborn Street.²

In 1640 Traske opened the second of his North River mills, south of the first mill, near the intersection of Silver and Beaver Streets. Thomas Lovell took over the old Mill Building up the river and opened a currying business, or leather shop, giving the area its third industrial use in five years.³

Traske had opened his second mill on a narrower section of the river and took advantage of the more rapid water to turn his wheels and mill stones. The presense of his mill gave the area one of its first popular names, that of "Traske's Plaine".

Yet the area was to play more than an industrial role in the developing Town of Salem. In 1661 events in the neighborhood were to involve no less a person than Charles the Second.

By 1661 the Southwick's had given up the 'glass workes' and gone into farming. The Buffum's, Traske's and other families had built homes at the South end of Boston Street and the west ends of Federal and Essex Streets. And about 1659 the Southwick's committed the mistake of entertaining several itinerate Quakers.

The Southwick's and their interested neighbors began skipping Sabbath services and holding private religious meetings and discussions in their homes. The response from the authorities was swift and extreme.

The outsiders were hung. The locals were excommunicated, whipped and then banished,⁴ and in 1661 banished "upon paine of death".⁵ Lawrence and Cassandra Southwick, now older members of the community, were forced to flee to Shelter Island in Long Island Sound, where they died in their first year there because of exposure and deprivation.⁶

It was the intention of local authorities to banish the Quaker neighborhood and seize its land. To that effect the court ordered that two Southwick children and heirs be sold into slavery, thus denying them all rights of the landed class.

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The attempt failed when several of the Salem Quakers made it to England and won an audience with the King. Charles was impressed enough to issue a decree guaranteeing at least limited freedom of religious consciences in all the colonies. When Salem tried to auction off the children into slavery no one dared bid on them and therefore they could not be sold. They lived on to possess the land and develop it. Their parents died, but their deaths led to changes in law felt throughout the Kingdom.⁷

They stayed on with the Buffum's, Traske's, Marston's, and Corwin's, and by 1700 there were eight homes on the southern end of Boston Street, controlling property between the road and the river.

The land to the rear around Gallows Hill was common pasture-land where sheep, cattle and horses grazed. These provided meat and hides for local and export markets and for a continuing leather industry.

William Traske died in 1666 and sometime after the mills became a stock company. They were of central importance to the town. It must be remembered that in 1629 Higginson describes a region of bountiful great meadows which the Indians had cultivated for generations until the plague of 1597-1606.⁸ The land was empty of trees and clear except for the 20 year growth of grass. Salem was chosen as a site to take advantage of these existing farms and re-cultivate them for corn. The corn was consumed in the colony and exported for the use of the lower classes in England. The upper classes did not care for the way Traske milled his meal.

In 1711 Joseph Boyce, Jr., purchased one-quarter interest in the Traske Mills and became a partner with William Traske's son, John Traske.⁹ The following year they gained permission from the town to open still another mill at the location of what is now Goodhue Street, on the condition that they would construct a bridge across the river at Spooners Point.

Joseph Boyce Jr. was a tanner. His presence suggests

two possibilities: that he took over the old mill site like Lovell before him as a tanning barn, or he may have used his interest in the mills to grind bark, which was needed in large supply for ^{the} tanning business. Boyce continued his interests in the mills until 1716, when he sold his interest to Col. Samuel Browne.

It was probably in the following half century that Traske's Plain took on the popular name of "Blubber Hollow." Popular history maintains that the area was used for processing whale blubber into oil. Little of record survives to describe this period, and the number of such industries was probably small.

The ship building industry was evident in the area as well. In 1783 Ebenezer Mann opened a ship yard near Traske's newest mills on the river. He built military and merchant vessels until he sold out to Christopher Turner, who built ships in size up to 300 tons until the economic misfortunes of the War of 1812.

In that year he gave up and divided his ship yard between his two sons who converted the property into tanyards, which by then had become the dominant industrial interest of the area.

The Town had listed four tanneries in 1768.¹⁰ In 1801 there were seven in the Hollows. In 1765 Joseph Southwick had constructed the first mill exclusively for grinding bark in the area over the town line in Danvers. He was a Quaker/preacher tanner and he developed a mill using horse power, with teams tied to a rod which turned the stone.¹¹

This preacher tanner's daughter had married a miller, William Frye, who purchased interest in the Traske Mills and went on to construct additional grain mills of his own. Her name was Tamison Southwicke, and they named a daughter Cassandra Southwick Frye in memory of her great-great-great grandmother.¹²

By 1783 Frye had opened his own mills near the bridge. He had married into a family of tanners and his own interest in the industry was evident. He helped establish his son in the tanning business as well as his sons-in-law.¹³

There seemed to be a sense of mutual support in the old Quaker community, as families intermarried and economic resources were used to help one another establish small family industries. Members of the Frye extended family were calling themselves "tanners" by 1790's.

Two other contemporaries were Benjamin Osgood who listed himself as a "cordwainer" on a deed dated 1773¹⁴ and Daniel Poor who is listed as purchasing 100 hides from the ship "Three Sisters" in 1775.¹⁵

Ichabod Nichols, husband of Cassandra Southwicke Frye is listed as tanner on a deed dated in 1794¹⁶ and Benjamin Cheever appears as a tanner in the area in 1796.¹⁷ Ezekiel Wellman and Thomas Rand are listed as tanners at their place of business at 180 Federal Street in 1797.¹⁸

Others appear in the following decade: Soloman Varney, 1806;¹⁹ Phinehas Cole, 1806;²⁰ Matthew Purinton, 1807²¹ and Jacob Putnam in 1807.²²

For the most part these businesses were small, employing the sons and perhaps one to three outside laborers. The proprietors operated as old-style tradesmen, training their sons to pass on the modest businesses. The families supported one another. The Fryes were related to the Southwicke's, Carlton's, Nichol's, Purington's, Buxton's, Varney's and Shillaber's. William Frye's estate listed loans to Buxton's, Varney's, Purington's, and Nichol's.²³

Jacob Putnam brought a completely new approach to the local tanning industry. He was a merchant, the son of a merchant farmer. He was a direct descendent of Nathaniel Putnam, one of the "Accusing Putnams" of the Salem witchcraft proceedings. He married the daughter of James Silver, an East Indian merchant. In 1805 Jacob Putnam began a two-year sea cruise in which he explored import and export possibilities and returned to Salem in 1807 to open the area's first leather conglomerate. Putnam established an importing business, buying his own ships and bringing in his own hides from South America. He opened tanyards on Goodhue Street, as well as currying and warehouse operations. He opened commercial outlets in Salem and exported what he couldn't sell locally on his own ships.

In other words, he was a completely different kind of industrialist: an outsider with new ideas.²⁴

The Turners converted their boat yard in 1812. In 1819 Joseph Buxton,²⁵ Joseph Dalton²⁶ and Nathaniel Osgood²⁷ were listed as operating businesses in the area.

But Putnam was not to be imitated until 1829 when Leonard Bond Harrington became the second to see the economic potential of controlling all aspects of import and production.

Harrington was a descendent of Robert Harrington, an Englishman listed in Watertown in 1640 and not the later Irish Harringtons. Leonard's father had been a tanner in Roxbury and the boy had rebelled against the business and gone away to sea at the age of 13 in 1816. His fortunes at sea were less than Putnam's. The boy caught yellow fever, and after finally recovering on ship found himself shipwrecked and abandoned. When he was finally recovered he returned to Roxbury and apprenticed himself at his father's trade. He came to Salem and opened his business in 1829, and like Putnam finally prospered.²⁸

The expansion of the tanning industry along Boston Street required labor as well as capital. Most local tanners were from old families and wanted to open their own businesses. Surplus labor was scarce.

By the 1830's a solution to the labor shortage was being found. Journeyman tanners and curriers were being encouraged to immigrate from the tanning district of Ireland, the Cork area.²⁹ This was more than a decade before the Irish famine. Some of these early immigrants include: Joseph Cochrain 1832; Hugh Conway 1836; Patrick Green and Richard Morgan 1838; Patrick Quinn and Thomas Reynolds 1839; Michael McCarty, James Morris, Arthur Doherty and John Riley in 1840; and their families.³⁰

With the potato famine of the 1840's the Hollow became a haven for any hungry Irishman who knew any aspect of the leather trade. In 1844 at the first stages of the famine there were 41 tanneries in the town.³¹ By 1850 there would be 83 such businesses in the Hollow.

In 1850 Jacob Putnam was employing 20 men at \$7.50 a week and producing an annual product of \$35,000. Thomas Nichols was employing 12 men, James McGeary ¹⁵ men, and the company of Malloon and Harrington, ¹⁰ men.³²

In 1845 the total value of leather produced in Salem was \$642,000.³³ By 1870 Leonard B. Harrington would be producing nearly that much in his own tanyards.³⁴ In 1850 he had an annual product of #36,000. In ten years it had increased to \$157,507 and by 1870 had gone up to \$534,828. In that same year operations run by his brother grossed another \$515,000.³⁵ By 1870 Gibney was employing 70 men, Harrington 60, Stimpson 60, and L.B. Harrington 62.³⁶

Their growing industries were aided by good ports, high quality hides from South America and Africa, plentiful trained labor and ready markets, especially in the South. Local tanners entered into large contracts to make sole and shoe leather out of tough African hides. The leather was ^{used} in shoes for the slaves population.³⁷

The African leather was very stiff and required recurrent soaking in a salt solution. As a consequence great piles of dry hides were stacked along the banks of the North River, so they could be soaked by the incoming tides.

The tanners of Salem and Peabody formed themselves as an industrial group by means of an informal guild-type organization called "The Leather Senate" or the "Senate" for short. The group met commercially at the Joshua B. Grant Company at 51 Boston Street. Grant was a commercial dealer in currying tools.

The Senate passed on its powers from generation to generation and in 1880 included James Riley, Frank Wade, James Dugan, J.A. Lord, John Culliton, David Prescott, Henry Varney, Urban R. Williams, Samuel Pitman, Joseph Walden and Joseph L. Austin. It maintained its function through 1886, when it became the industrialist alliance against the unions.³⁸

In 1861 these merchants came up against the Civil War, which instantly cut off their markets and the industry locally suffered an extreme 30 month depression. The depression didn't end until local merchants acquired Union Army contracts late in the war.³⁹ Evidence of the financial problems can be seen in the estate of William Frye, Junior, the son of the miller, who died in 1862. His estate reveals bankruptcy and includes a note from one of the administrators asking how they can best inform Mrs. Frye that she will have to move out of her family house.⁴⁰

A distinction between the old Quaker families and the new-style industrialists can be seen in their investment practices. The old families invested in local property, in their tanyard, currying shop, home and possibly another house or two to lease.⁴¹

The new families had learned to invest in paper as well. The 1866 probate of Jacob Putnam reveals him a millionaire in his own right. His inventory includes the conventional kinds of investments: properties on Boston, Goodhue, and Essex Streets, but it also includes large blocks of stock in six banks, eight railroads and one insurance company.⁴²

Putnam owned a hundred shares of the Asiatic National Bank of Salem. Leonard Bond Harrington not only owned shares but served as the bank's President, as well as Vice President of the Old Salem Savings Bank.

Following the post-war recovery, the leather merchants of Boston Street had moved center stage in the city's economic circles.⁴³

Besides the Asiatic National Bank, Putnam held shares in First National; Merchants National; South Danvers National; and large blocks of shares in the National Hide and Leather Bank and the Shoe and Leather National Bank.⁴⁴

The sons of these merchants were moving into the respectable commercial society of Boston and were opening residences there. In another decade they would make Salem the nation's leading producer of leather, capturing one third of ^{the} national industry.

At the time of his death in 1866 Putman also held more than \$15,000 in stock in the Michigan Central Railroad; and lessor amounts in the Western; the New York Central; the Providence, Boston and Worcester; the Boston and Worcester; the Concord; the Nashua and Lowell; and the Fitchburg Railroads.

The growth of steam power was also playing a part in the growth of the local tanning industry. The local industry had been developed originally on water and hand power, but by 1850, 11% of the tanneries were operating under steam power.⁴⁵

In 1852 Stephen Frye opened the first steam powered bark mill.⁴⁶ In 1860 Stimpson's machinery was producing 40 horse power; and Frye's 25 horse power.⁴⁷

But what of the labor which had come over from Ireland to work these growing mills? Most remained tenants, living two or three families in many of the houses still standing near Boston Street.⁴⁸ Houses were erected in whole blocks by the Carlton and Walton families, thereafter sold or leased to the laboring classes.

In 1874 Timothy Walton owned 29 houses or lots in the neighborhood, pushing to develop Grant, Rawlins, Purchase, Prospect and Ord Streets.⁴⁹

In 1850 a very modest home would cost \$400.⁵⁰ Yet the average wage in the tanyards and currier shops had been \$7.50 a week,⁵¹ with an average workweek consisting of 60 to 70 hours.⁵² The working conditions were poor and injury and death were common around the leather machinery, vats, and gravel beds. The most dangerous machine was the splitter, which was used with a knife to strip thick horse or similar hides for shoe leather.

It was common for a man's arms to be broken two or three times in his life if he worked at the machine.⁵³ One local resident, who worked in the local mills in the early part of this century, said he would "never work on the splitter but the men who did it were good. They could take a belt of hide as thick as your thumb and strip of a layer as thin as your thumb nail."⁵⁴ It was not uncommon for workers to get their aprons caught and be pulled into the machine, snapping their spines.⁵⁵

By 1860, even though the value of products produced locally had doubled, the wages had remained stagnant. The Irish had been welcomed by the descendents of the Quaker ghetto. They had found a community sensitive to discrimination, a place where they could live at peace with their neighbors and could find work. But following the Civil War this harmony was ending. The workers who had bought their homes often lost them. In 1870 the wages had gone up 50%, but mostly as a result of post-war inflation.⁵⁶

By the next decade the tensions were coming to a head. In 1885 the Knights of Labor organized locally for the first time. They called for a regional boycott of Charles Harrington and company because it would not negotiate with the local labor

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organization. Salem and Peabody were the last of the two leather centers in Massachusetts which had not recognized the Knights of Labor as a bargaining union.⁵⁷

In early July, 1886 the Local Knights of Labor presented the mill owners with a demand for a 59-hour work week and on July 12, 60 larger mill owners in Salem and Peabody responded with a general lock-out of tanneries and currying businesses. The lock-out shut out more than 1500 workers in the two communities, and the length of the strike: four months, allowed competing communities to win a larger share of Salem's markets.⁵⁸

The issue of scab labor rose early. The tanneries attempted to continue doing some work with members of the family, and with laborers who would agree not to support the Knights of Labor. Within three days the strikers had placed a dummy at Harrington's tannery with a sign reading: "scabs to let."⁵⁹

On July 20, the first incident of violence was reported, with the Salem News headlining: "Non-Union men brutally assaulted in Salem." In the weeks that followed the local paper was to assume a bitterly anti-labor stance, calling the workers "tormentors" on July 21, "unbridled hooligans" on July 27 and "ruffians" on Oct. 21.

At the end of the strike it editorialized on Nov. 29, 1886: "We believed...that the Knights were too hasty, too imperious, too prone to give reign to blind unreasonablness rather than calm deliberation...They undertook too much...in a course as suicidal as it was misguided."

The workers failed even to gain the support of the institutions of their own community. The Catholic Archdioces of Boston issued a statement condemning the labor action and officially excommunicating all members of the Knights of Labor.⁶⁰

On Thanksgiving day there was a large pro-labor demonstration on Ord Street, which led to rock throwing and arrests. On October 25, a grand jury in Plymouth handed down eight indictments against North Shore labor organizers. The cases resulted from the boycott of Charles Harrington and Company.⁶¹

On Nov. 20, Salem strike leader George A. Warren was found with a bullet in his head. Nine days later it was over, with the Salem News proclaiming: "an unconditional surrender of the late striking tanners and curriers of Salem and Peabody."⁶²

The industrialists had won but the price would be great. The length of the strike had lost them contracts. The bitterness caused many of the strikers to move elsewhere to industries with local union shops.⁶³ The Salem industry would never fully recover.

In 1661 the Quakers had made a stand against intoleration and they had thereafter prospered. In 1886 they had made a stand against the 59-hour week and thereafter declined.

It was a loss for the strikers as well. But for the strikers it was one in a long series of defeats. It was George A. Warren's death which may have contributed to the end of the conflict, coming as it did only days before the "unconditional surrender." Warren's life was similar to those of the majority of strike leaders.

He was born in 1850⁶⁴ in the home of his grandfather on Upham Street, who had come to Salem from New Hampshire in the early 1830's to work as a chemist in the Salem laboratory on Walter Street.⁶⁵

George's father and mother were Jesse Warren, a tanner, and Olivia Farrel, born in Ireland.⁶⁶ His parents were married young and disappear from record soon after George's birth, leaving George to be raised by his grandparents.

His grandfather had come to Salem to seek financial gain. He had purchased land on Upham Street in 1848⁶⁷ and by 1853⁶⁸

was being assessed for a home and "an unfinished house." Both houses were probably erected by George's uncle who had become a carpenter in Salem, and they were constructed to give the family a home and income and an entree to the middle classes.

But in 1853 the property was seized for debts and the uncle who had built the homes was forced to step in and buy them from the grandparents for \$1,000⁶⁹ and then sell off the newer building for \$600⁷⁰ to allow the family to hold onto the remaining property.

George lived on Upham Street until about 1874 when he moved into the Essex House,⁷¹ a working class bachelor's quarters at the site of the present East India Center construction on Essex Street, moving from there eventually to the Central House.

He lived as a bachelor in these units until his death in 1886.⁷² In such an environment he probably discussed with others the need for a union and made plans for its organization.

George is typical in several respects of the strike leaders. He was not first generation. He was not an unreasonable or ungrateful immigrant. His roots on his father's side went back to the Seventeenth Century.⁷³ His family had striven to succeed, become successful for a short period and then fallen back into poverty.

William O'Keefe came from a similar background. He was indicted in 1886.⁷⁴ He was the son of Jeremiah O'Keefe, a currier who had come to Salem about the time of the famine and owned property as early as 1854.⁷⁵

William was born in 1862⁷⁶ and in 1872 his parents bought a house on Beaver Street,⁷⁷ renting out quarters to help make the mortgage payments.⁷⁸ In 1886 the family lost the home, forced to sell it by creditors for one dollar.⁷⁹

James Riley, arrested in August, 1886, was also second generation. His father had controlled leased property on Hanson Street for a while, sub-leasing space in the house, but had been unable to purchase it.⁸⁰

These were all at least second generation tanning workers in Salem whose families had already failed. They were doubtful about their futures and anxious to seize some degree of economic security. For all of them the dream of progress and prosperity had come and gone, missing them. Other strike leaders included Richard Barry, arrested August 7, 1886; John F. Halpin and John Herlihy, Nov. 30, 1886 and Jerry Conway, Dec. 20, 1887.⁸¹

Even with the decline of the local leather industry after 1886, new tanneries continued to appear, as well as new buyers for the old tanyards. Many of those new investors were Irish, who would see their investments wither in the years ahead. The Quakers, shaken by the strike and the new social conditions and attitudes emerging around them, were selling out.

Michael Loony began working for wages in the local tanyards in 1867 and in 1880 opened his own business and in 1902 was a partner in the firm of Driscoll and Looney.⁸²

P. Creedon arrived from Ireland in 1880 and in 1887 went into business for himself. In 1893 he expanded by buying out the John Huse tannery on Boston Street.⁸³

Patrick Egan came to Salem from Cork in Ireland in 1846 and worked at first in the Charles Joselyn tannery in Danvers. In 1871 he opened his own business in Salem which his son Matthew Egan continued to run after Patrick's death.⁸⁴

The next great blow to the local industry came in 1914, when a fire began in the Korn/^{leather} Factory at 57 Boston Street. The fire spread and is remembered as the Great Salem Fire. The fire destroyed more than 1400 buildings, including the Eclipse Leather Co., 31r Boston St; Charles H. Keefe of 46 Boston St. M.F. Kelly Co. of 53 Boston; Arthur T. Way, Inc. of 23 Boston; Enterprise Leather Co., 31 Boston; P. Creedon Co., 59 Boston;

C.H. Carey and Co. and the Consol Shoe Co., 61 Boston Street.⁸⁴

The fire had an impact similar to the lock-out a generation before. Workers had lost their homes and many moved again out of the city looking for new jobs and residences.⁸⁵ War conscription also siphoned from the remaining working population.

Of the nine businesses burned by the fire, six failed to re-open or relocate.⁸⁶ In 1920 there were twenty-nine tanning businesses left in the city.⁸⁷ In that year three more closed, including the last of the old giants, the American Hide and Leather Company.⁸⁸ Leather businesses have continued down to the present day, but not on the scale as before. Many of the buildings were either torn down or converted to different industrial use. The Trostel Leather Company is still operating on Proctor Street, with a handful of other related business sprinkled throughout the city.

But in spite of the misery caused by the fire, it opened new land and made possible new investment. The major new investor was Frank A. Poor, descended from Salem, and Danvers tanners. His father, Joseph H. Poor had himself been a tanner. He was trained for his father's business, but could probably see the handwriting on the wall.⁸⁹ In 1901 he formed the Bay State Lamp Company in Danvers.⁹⁰ In 1915 Poor purchased burnt-out land at 60 Boston Street and began the construction of a new four-story facility, opening in 1916 at that location as the Hygrade Lamp Company. The facility produced 11,000 lamps per day. The company suffered critical labor shortages throughout World War 1.

Poor was joined by his brothers Walter E. Poor and Edward J. Poor who all served as officers of the corporation. In 1931 the company changed its name to the Hygrade Sylvania Electric Product, Inc. and was producing lamps and radio tubes.

Following the World War I labor shortages, Hygrade and other local manufacturers were able to draw on new immigrant groups, including the Armenians who were beginning to cluster around Beaver Street as the Irish had done half a century before. They were driven out of their homelands by the Turkish persecution of 1894-1896.

Their groups included laborers and tradesmen with carpenters, shoemakers, tailors, weavers, and barbers in predominance. Approximately 20% of the Armenian immigrants were laborers, and some of those found jobs in the growing electric light company of Boston Street.⁹¹

The Petrisian family was among the first to arrive in the Hollow in 1903, followed by the Sahigian, Markarian and Deoian families by 1906 and the Kechegian, Mooradian, Zartarian, Serakasian and Koshgiarian families by 1915.

Today the area of the Hollow retains much of its historical industrial nature, Boston Street contains the homes of the old Quaker planters and businessmen. Silver and Beaver Streets are predominantly Greek Revival design and dignity. Most of these homes have been well maintained structurally by the generations of working families which have possessed them. As one local elder resident of the area says: "The immigrants appreciated what they were able to find here, and they worked hard to keep it clean and pleasant."

Boston Street has been industrially active since 1635, drawing from the special advantages of the North River, regional highways, the Port at Salem, the railroads and most importantly the special skills of immigrant laborers. It served as a haven for the Quakers, then the Irish, then the Armenians. It became the economic center of Salem commerce in the latter part of the 19th Century, as well as the leather production center of the nation as a whole. As an economic resource it has been invaluable to the city's growth and development. As an historical resource it is unique.

"THE INDUSTRIAL AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
OF BOSTON STREET, SALEM"

footnotes

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