

Furnace Village

Today, the Furnace Village neighborhood has the largest concentration of colonial and early national period homes in Easton. It is truly a gem that has been recognized as a National Historic District. Once Easton Furnace possessed the highest degree of industrialization in town, but that industry never grew large enough to transform Furnace Village the way that the Shovel Shop created the urbanized landscape of North Easton.

Strangely, the earliest people in the area missed completely the industrial potential of the Mulberry Brook Watershed settling instead in the small part of the Canoe River Aquifer in the extreme southwest corner of town. The first settler was Seth Babbitt who came to Easton from Taunton about 1715. He lived perhaps in a small three room house on Norton Avenue which stood into the Nineteenth Century. Seth Babbitt died in 1751. Seth's brother Erasmus moved to town shortly after 1715. He showed no more appreciation of the water power of the neighborhood than his brother and died in 1730. The brothers left enough descendants, so that the southern part of Furnace Village was long called Babbitt Town.

One of these Babbitts was Erasmus' son Seth who was Easton's first doctor. His library included works on surgery, midwifery, fevers, herbal remedies and anatomy. Along with books by the two great medical authorities of his time, Doctors Boerhaave and Sydenham, Babbitt owned two Bibles, two dictionaries and a copy of *Paradise Lost*. His medical kit had instruments for surgery and dentistry as well as two lancets for bleeding patients and a rectal syringe. Like many doctors of his time his medicines included many poisonous metals including mercury and lead, but Doctor Babbitt also favored herbal medicines. In fact herbal remedies outweighed chemical ones by a three to one margin. Included here were the opium derivative laudanum, quinine, chamomile flowers and gentian root, which is better known as a main ingredient in Moxie. Reflecting a little light on a darker side of Easton's history was a pound and a half of Guaiac Wood, a specific "cure" for syphilis.

Dr. Babbitt was buried in a lonely and now lost grave in Babbitt-town after dying of small-pox while serving in the medical corps during the French and Indian War. It's a measure of medical sophistication in early Easton that the town doctor died of small-pox fifty years after inoculation had been introduced in the colony!

The industrious and interrelated Keith and Williams families were the first to harness the power of Mulberry Brook in Furnace Village. In May 1742 Eleazer Keith and Silas and Benjamin Williams built a sawmill on the stream to the west of South Street. The mill was probably on Keith's property since his house, built no later than 1730 and probably the third oldest still standing in town, is just down the street at the corner of Highland and South Streets (29 Highland Street). This mill site was never a major factory, but generations of Eastoners, mostly Keiths, certainly tried to turn a profit there. By 1765, when the property passed to Eleazer's son Samuel, the sawmill had been transformed into a gristmill, or perhaps a gristmill had been added to the sawmill. The site stayed in the Keith family as its use changed. In 1801 Samuel Keith, 2nd turned it into a linseed oil mill which it remained until 1830 when it ceased operation. Four years later Samuel, 2nd re-opened the site as a shingle mill.

Later, Keith formed a partnership with A.A. Rotch and others. This partnership manufactured thread on the old site. After the death of Samuel, 2nd in 1859, his son,

Hiram Keith, and William Davidson continued the business until about 1861. For some years the building was not used. Later still, it was purchased by Isaac Lothrop Pratt, then of Rose, Illinois, and thread was again made there under the firm name of Pratt, Belcher & Co..

Next Amos B. Pratt of Easton owned the old mill for a few years making cotton batting and wooden shingles there. It was bought by James Belcher in 1878 and used as a saw-mill for a while. Later, F. Sherwood Keith, a direct descendent of the first owner, Eleazer Keith, used the building for a duck house. He died in 1927, and the site was finally abandoned. Today, it is a picturesque, but overgrown ruin with some of the early gristmill stones built into the later foundations.

This busy little mill proved the power of Mulberry Brook and began the development of Furnace Village. Highland Street (originally called Williams Street) began as a footpath connecting the houses in the neighborhood to Bay Road. The eastern section from near Foundry Street to the Bay Road was formally laid out as a road in 1741. In the same year the section of what is now Foundry Street in Furnace Village was also laid out. South Street, once called Jockey Lane, probably began as a cart path to the sawmill.

Upstream from the sawmill several other industries once operated. Around the time of the Revolution Edward Williams opened a tannery that was continued by him and his family for many years after the start of the Nineteenth Century. Between the tannery and the Keith property four generations of the Williams Family ran a cider mill. This mill, finally known as the Rollins Cider Mill, but still in the hands of a Williams' descendent, continued in use until at least the 1930's. People came from all over the area to buy cider there despite numerous cider mills in other towns. The foundation of the old mill can still be seen in the woods with a huge hill of apple pulp that has a uniquely springy feel under foot.

Above the tannery on the south side of Route 106 was a fulling mill about which little is known. A fulling mill beat wool cloth to size and the remains of the beating area can still be seen in the streambed. In 1834 Edward J. W. Morse bought this old mill site and made cotton thread there in a three story factory with a small bell on top. At that time Morse was operating a number of small factories making various stages of the cotton thread process. Decades later, the Morses centralized all thread making in the factory at the Morse privilege in South Easton. The little factory then passed through a variety of owners and renters including Walter Hill who patented his Acme Cartridge Loader in 1885. The building was abandoned shortly after 1900.

Just a decade after the start of the sawmill in 1742 other entrepreneurs began one of the most interesting industrial complexes in early New England. On December 13, 1751 John Williams, Daniel Williams, Matthew Hayward, Josiah Keith, Jr., Timothy Williams, Josiah Churchill, Benjamin Williams, Jr., Jabez Churchill, and James Godfrey founded a partnership to produce sand and hollow ware from iron. Most of this group were among the most prominent men in the southern part of town. John and Daniel Williams owned a quarter part each, Matthew Hayward one eighth part and each of the others 1/16th part. Josiah Churchill, listed in the deed as a founder, was the iron making expert in the group. They agreed to build a dam, a blast furnace and any other buildings needed to make iron by November 1, 1752. Old Pond, on the north side of Route 106 west of Swift's Park, resulted from the dam made for the original furnace which was probably located on the east side of the spillway.

Harmony Hall, one of the most famous and mysterious buildings in Easton, may have been built as part of this first phase of construction either as a charcoal shed or part of the original smelting furnace. The earliest reference to buildings on the site, except for the blast furnace at the dam, comes in a 1776 deed. This deed mentions a “coal house, warehouse, and cabin furnace.” The brick work at the south end of the Hall certainly looks early enough to date from this period.

The original foundry partnership went through several changes over the next twenty years. Matthew Hayward increased his ownership interest and in 1757 erected a sawmill on the Furnace dam. Hayward sold the mill in 1764 to Abisha Leach, the father of Sheperd Leach.

In 1773 James Perry purchased a quarter interest in the foundry and followed this up in 1776 by buying a 1/2 share from Matthew Hayward. Eventually, Perry would come to own the whole furnace, plus other iron related holdings in Easton and elsewhere. Perry seems to have had a vision of an integrated and large scale iron making operation. This dream in the hands of other men would transform America. Sadly, James Perry was both ahead of his time and unlucky.

Initially, however, his business prospered. He and his men made cannon and cannon balls for the Revolutionary War. These guns were proofed by firing them north over Old Pond into a stone embankment which may still be seen in the woods. Balls weighing three pounds with a caliber of 2.91 inches have been recovered; grapeshot was produced as well. The light cannons that fired those balls, called grasshoppers, were effective field artillery. Perry’s cannon making operation was what allegedly attracted a visit from General Washington to Easton. Perry may have also sold cannon and balls to privateers who sailed in search of British supply ships.

James Perry was also a patriot who did more than just profit from the war. He served as a Captain in the Continental Army, and in 1778 he hired soldiers from Norton and Easton out of his own pocket to serve in the Continental Army. Easton owed him 557 pounds, 13 shillings, and 13 pence for war-time expenses, and there is no record he was ever repaid. Then, in 1783, Perry’s Furnace was destroyed by fire. He tried to rebuild, but the post-war depression hampered his efforts. Cheap bar iron began to be imported from Russia, and competition grew. Perry began to spend more of his time in court defending suits for debt until in 1787 he apparently joined Shay’s Rebellion. Characterized in military correspondence as the “most dangerous man in Massachusetts” because of his cannon making ability, he was arrested while travelling by sleigh to the scene of the rebellion with his cannon patterns. He was finally released from prison after much pleading by our town’s Selectmen.

Perry continued to own the furnace until around the turn of the Nineteenth Century, but it was often heavily mortgaged. In 1804 Cyrus Alger bought the business and a year later sold a part interest to Sheperd Leach. As we have seen, Leach’s father had operated a sawmill at the Furnace for many years, and he had also bought a forge somewhere on the dam from Perry sometime before 1800, so Sheperd Leach had been raised around iron making. Sometime between 1808 and 1810 he purchased the whole business from Alger.

It was under the ownership of Sheperd Leach that the Furnace took the form we see today. The workers’ houses on the east side of South Street were probably built at this time. A company store, still standing on the west side of the corner of Foundry Street and Poquanticut Avenue (559 Foundry Street), was in operation by 1808. By 1810 it had

become the foundry office. Upstairs was the counting room with sliding windows to pay workmen. Two large two-story vaults were built into the wall to store iron-making patterns.

Also in 1810 Leach undertook the most massive engineering project in the history of the town. To increase the water power at Old Pond, Leach built what was then called the Large Reservoir, now called New Pond.

The New Pond Dam is the most massive drywall construction in town and one of the largest in the state. Not only does it parallel Route 106, but it continues partly around the pond on the east side. This extension bridged a canal that stretched out both under the pond and east down the hill to Old Pond. The visible remains of this canal are as herculean as the dam that provided water for it.

The canal's extension into New Pond became visible with the low water of 1993 as did a more enigmatic feature. Running roughly parallel to the current dam about 50 to 100 yards to the north are the remains of another stone structure. The eastern end, which starts about halfway down a slope which is usually submerged, has the size and shape of a typical farm stonewall. However, when the wall reaches the central part of the pond, huge boulders and slabs of bedrock, part of an underlying ledge, seem to create a dam. This western end, still partially submerged when viewed by the author, looks to have been broken down to allow the stream to flow through. Two possible explanations suggest themselves. First is that these are the remains of an earlier dam built to supply water through the canal to Old Pond. Another explanation is that this is a cofferdam built to hold water back during the excavations that created New Pond dam. At any rate, the dam and canal at New Pond are truly gigantic projects undertaken in a day when hand tools and ox power were the only engineering tools.

Sadly, according to Kippy Grant, New Pond drained a wet land that was essential to keeping Old Pond filled; the need to create an even larger water supply might explain the building of a larger New Pond Dam, the one we see today. Earlier, another canal had been dug further north to divert additional water to Old Pond. Finally, in 1825 Leach's Pond on the Easton/Sharon line was created to further control the water supply. Leach's business continued to expand despite his water power problems. In 1823 he owned seven furnaces in town although the locations are now not known. These vast undertakings should have led to Easton's becoming the iron center of Massachusetts; why it did not is one of the great mysteries of Easton's history.

In 1812 Leach built himself a two-story Federal style house with a large chimney, numerous fireplaces and four brick ovens, two of which are in the cellar. This house, on the east corner of Foundry Street and Poquanticut Avenue (557 Foundry Street), still stands and is the model for the Wheaton House on Bay Road.

Leach was thrown from his chaise in 1832 and died as a result. In the religious schism that led to the founding of Unitarianism in town, Leach had remained strongly committed to the Reverend Luther Sheldon's Orthodox Congregational Society which became the Easton Evangelical Congregational Church in 1839. He was reputed to be the wealthiest man in town in his time and was noted for his generosity. Clearly, he was a man of exceptional technological vision.

Since Leach was childless, his home and his business passed to his brother-in-law Lincoln Drake and his sons, Lincoln S. Drake and Abbott L. Drake. The old homestead remained in the Drake/Belcher family until the late 1970's. The sons kept the business

going when their father died in 1872, but the Drake Foundry ceased operation about 1890 because it was no longer able to compete with companies like Carnegie Steel which were closer to raw materials and better capitalized. The lack of a direct railroad connection in the neighborhood was the biggest handicap because it increased the cost of shipping in raw materials and shipping out finished goods. The old office, which had been converted to a pattern storage building, was sold to the Swift brothers for a store.

The demise of the Drake Foundry was not the end of iron-making in Furnace Village. In 1837 Alexander Boyden, the brother of the discoverer of iron malleablizing, started a company with Lincoln Drake as the head. This new foundry was located on the south side of Foundry Street opposite the original furnace site. Boyden left the company in 1839, but Drake continued in operation and in 1847 produced malleable castings that won a silver medal at the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanics Association's exhibition. Drake sold the malleable iron business to Daniel Belcher in 1849, and for a few years Belcher made brass castings as well as malleable iron. Like Leach before him, Daniel Belcher built a beautiful house in the neighborhood which still stands at 541 Foundry Street.

The specialty production of malleable iron castings enabled the new foundry to overcome the disadvantages of location faced by the Drake Foundry. Thus, this foundry has continued to expand to the present day despite two disastrous fires in 1880 and 1922. The 1880 fire burned the company flat. The cause of the February, 1922 fire was a full furnace of molten iron bursting out and setting fire to a coal pile. The brick walls of the main building, which contained the furnaces and where the molding was done, were left standing, but the pattern house was burned completely. The office and annealing buildings escaped. The loss was set at \$5,000, partly covered by insurance. The threat of fire damage was reduced when the company donated land for a neighborhood fire station in the 1950's. In 1964 the arrival of town water allowed the installation of a sprinkler system in the foundry.

In 1968 Belcher Malleable merged with the Dayton Malleable Iron Company. The company has vigorously attempted to maintain its competitive advantage through modernization. Today, operating under the name AMCAST Products Inc., it uses electric furnaces which allow continuous pouring while reducing air pollution more completely than the older system.

While the area around the Furnace was the most important part of the neighborhood, a second smaller center developed around the Four Corners at the junction of Highland Street and Route 123. The restaurant that recently closed at that corner (95 Highland Street) was the successor of the well remembered Tally-Ho. That name itself recalls the days when this section of town was the preserve of hunters and trappers, a time that did not end until well into the Twentieth Century. For instance, in 1947 Joseph Correia shot a nine point buck weighing 275 pounds, the largest ever recorded in Easton, in the woods behind the old Tally-Ho. The abundant wildlife of Easton provided sport for some, but during the Depression the meat and skins brought home by hunters often helped families to survive.

Besides hunters even more exotic visitors stopped in this area. Prior to World War I, every spring a band of gypsies would travel through Easton, camping either at New Pond or at the Four Corners.

During the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, a number of farmers lived in the Four Corners area, and the population there probably equaled that of the still developing

area around the Furnace. The first grammar school in the neighborhood was built at the Four Corners in 1790. The first wooden structure remained in use until about 1820 when it was replaced by one of the four new brick schools built in town. This school continued in existence until 1869, but its district was reduced to the extreme southwest part of town when Furnace Village proper got its own school in 1846.

In 1869 the southern Bay Road district and the two Furnace districts consolidated into the Union District. The two story school for the new district was built at the southeast corner of Highland and South Streets (23 Highland Street). Although primarily an elementary school, for some years High School studies were taught there, and each year a number of scholars graduated after completing a course of studies like that offered in North Easton. Beginning in 1889, high school students from all over town were given free transportation to North Easton. Furnace Village scholars went by wagon to Easton Center Station and then by train to the High School. After the turn of the century students briefly used the Norton and Taunton Street Railway.

The old school building was improved in 1925 with the installation of plumbing and electricity. In September of that year lightning hit the school's bell tower, but repairs were quickly made. Also in that year students from the Howard neighborhood began to go to the Union School. The old school finally closed in 1939 when the WPA erected a new school on Bay Road. Beginning in 1953 the building housed the Easton Church of the Nazarene for more than twenty years. It is now a private dwelling

As we can see, the needs of the young were well provided for in Furnace Village. The needs of the other end of life were also seen to. While the Furnace never supported its own church, it did have two large cemeteries to meet the spiritual needs of the community. The two offer an interesting illustration of the development of new ideas about cemeteries in the Nineteenth Century.

New England's earliest type of cemetery is well represented by the Old Burying Ground of 1714 on Church Street. It is stark, even desolate, with no landscaping and cold, dark slate stones, It is certainly not a place where the average person would want to spend much time. The earliest cemetery in Furnace Village, the 1816 Dr. Edward Dean Cemetery on Highland Street at the junction of South Street, still retains the feel of the burying ground of a century before, but there have been some changes. A fine stone retaining wall runs along the front of the cemetery which is reached by climbing a few stone steps. Inside, one finds the older slate stones mixed with the warmer tones of marble. A few obelisk shaped stones depart from the simple style of stone tablets invariably found in earlier years. Dr. Edward Dean who died in 1816 was the first interment here, but there are several older stones reflecting a trend in Nineteenth Century Easton to relocate relatives to newer sites. This interesting custom can also be seen in the Central Cemetery and in the South Easton Cemetery

In 1849 Lincoln Drake gave to Daniel Belcher and others a large lot on the east side of South Street "to manage for burial purposes for the benefit of the village." Between the building of the two cemeteries, a revolution had begun in cemetery design. This is well represented by the Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge and the later Village Cemetery in North Easton. In both places extensive landscaping and sculptured memorial markers are designed to attract people to visit the cemetery. The Furnace Village Cemetery, still in use today, was originally surrounded by arbor-vitae trees, a symbol of immortality. Fine granite markers in general replace the earlier marbles ones, and granite curbing

subdivides the various family plots. While not a place for picnics as we are told occurred in Mount Auburn Cemetery, the Furnace Village Cemetery reflects a large step away from the austere beliefs of the first settlers.

Chaffin tantalizes his readers by noting that the victim of Easton's most sensational murder lies in the Furnace Village Cemetery without naming who she was. The story is that a woman died suddenly of an apparent stomach ailment. Poison was immediately suspected because the "guilty parties" had poisoned neighborhood animals as a means of revenge against their owners. The woman's body was exhumed, and an autopsy proved everyone's suspicions true. The husband fled. After the woman was reinterred, the body was stolen from the grave! Chaffin closes with:

Though the law was foiled, however, justice will yet be done, No man can escape
that conscience whose retributive lash will sooner or later wield heavier and sharper
strokes than legal justice can possibly inflict.

Conscience did not have the desired effect, for the guilty apparently never came forward.

Before leaving Furnace Village, we should take a closer look at two neighborhood monuments, the old Foundry Office and Harmony Hall. From 1841 to 1862 the Easton Post Office was conducted in the Foundry Office. One postmaster was Thomas Davidson who, with his family, was the first to live upstairs. In 1882 Davidson's niece, Mrs. Helen Goward, became postmaster and served for twenty years. She was succeeded by her son William E Goward, postmaster until 1940. After leaving the Foundry Office the post office continued in Furnace Village in a separate building until it was moved to the Five Corners at Whistlestop Plaza.

Another occupant of the old building was Swift's Store which opened on April 1, 1890. The business, run by Howard and Luther Swift, continued in business for 58 years. Both Swift brothers had worked as molders at Belcher Malleable, and Howard Swift had clerked at Kimball's Store on Bay Road. Their operation was a true New England general store. According to one observer:

A man could come in and buy grain for his horse, food for his family, shoes for himself, or a dress for his wife. The cracker barrel and the coffee grinder and the butter tub all occupied a prominent spot. The problems of the day were talked over around the pot-bellied stove.

The store was open from quarter of seven in the morning until ten at night, day in and day out. The brothers made deliveries in town, in Norton and probably in Mansfield as well. Each day they went to Easton Depot to pick up supplies, and on Saturday one of the brothers travelled to Boston. In winter, deliveries were made in a pung lit by kerosene lanterns. Other owners tried to continue the general store after the Swifts retired, but the next successful owner was Donald "Trader Don" Brewster, who converted the store into an antique store and home furnishings store. Today the building is the home of the law firm of Keach and Buckley.

Harmony Hall, as mentioned above, may date back to the original furnace operation in 1752. Others have suggested it was built during the ownership of Sheperd Leach. Members of the Belcher family have documented its use as a charcoal shed until sometime between 1835 and 1846 when it became a school. During that period it was made over and fitted with desks and benches. It housed the students of this part of the neighborhood while a new building was constructed. Our High School had its origins

here as well because the last of the initial four terms of that school was taught at Harmony Hall in 1868. Private grammar schools also used the building during the Nineteenth Century.

The school room was also the home of the Easton Brass Band founded in 1841. Later a bandstand was built nearer the street. This musical connection may be the origin of the Hall's name. At any rate we know that Captain Lincoln Drake was taxed for Harmony Hall in 1860 and 1861. The musicians disbanded about 1878.

For many years church services and evening prayer meetings were held in the Hall. Sometime in the 1870's the school desks and benches were removed, a new floor was laid, and other repairs were made. In 1877 Andrew Hamilton organized a Sunday School with sixty members who met here for years. This school had a library of nearly fifty volumes. At this point the Hall was well on its way to becoming a neighborhood center. Christmas festivities, catch-penny fairs, suppers and sings as well as dancing parties were held there. In 1905 Harmony Grange was organized at the Hall.

In January, 1888 five women of the neighborhood organized what became the Outlook Club for the purposes of reading Shakespeare and English history. Throughout most of this century the club was synonymous with Harmony Hall. For many years it prospered as a literary group and in 1897 took the name Outlook Club. During World War I the club did a great deal of Red Cross sewing. In 1922 it became part of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, and in 1925 the members voted to expend \$450 to buy Harmony Hall. Extensive repairs were made at this time. The club beautified the property in 1932 with a pine tree dedicated to George Washington. This tree still stands today, probably the last such tree of many planted in town to commemorate the bicentennial of Washington's birth. In 1936, the club dedicated the first fireplace in the Hall as a memorial to Helen Drake. During the Second World War, members again rolled bandages for the Red Cross. After the War the organization gained a town wide reputation for its marvelous suppers, but as the group's hundredth anniversary neared it became clear that changing activities for women spelled the end of this proud organization. After a period of uncertainty, the remaining members of the Outlook Club passed title for Harmony Hall to the George Shepard Post #7 of the American Legion. The men of the Legion have lovingly repaired the old building and have even restored the famous Harmony Hall suppers.

Beautiful homes and important industrial sites mark Easton Furnace as a historical treasure, but the heart of the district is Harmony Hall. Born in the district's industrial past, it has served generations of Eastoners as a place of recreation and friendship. Sometimes one can listen and almost hear the laughter of school children and the sound of a brass band. Long may this building continue to serve its neighborhood!