Samuel Slater

Son of a yeoman farmer, Samuel Slater was born in Belper, Derbyshire, England on June 9, 1768. He became involved in the textile industry at the age of 14 when he was apprenticed to Jedediah Strutt, a partner of Richard Arkwright and the owner of one of the first cotton mills in Belper. Slater worked for Strutt for eight years and rose to become superintendent of Strutt's mill. It was in this capacity that he gained a comprehensive understanding of Arkwright's machines.

Believing that textile industry in England had reached its peak, Slater emigrated secretly to America in 1789 in hopes of making his fortune in America's infant textile industry. While others with textile manufacturing experience had emigrated before him, Slater was the first who knew how to build as well as operate textile machines. Slater, with funding from Providence investors and assistance from skilled local artisans, built the first successful water powered textile mill in Pawtucket in 1793.

By the time other firms entered the industry, Slater's organizational methods had become the model for his successors in the Blackstone River Valley. Later known as the Rhode Island System, it began when Slater enlisted entire families, including children, to work in his mills. These families often lived in company owned housing located near the mills, shopped at the company stores and attended company schools and churches. While not big enough to support the large mills which became common in Massachusetts, the Blackstone River's steep drop and numerous falls provided ideal conditions for the development of small, rural textile mills around which mill villages developed.

One of the earliest of these mill villages was Slatersville. Located on the Branch River in present day North Smithfield, Rhode Island, Slatersville was built by Samuel Slater and his brother John in 1803. By 1807, the village included the Slattersville Mill, the largest and most modern industrial building of its day, two tenement houses for workers, the owner's house and the company store. In the early twentieth century, industrialist and preservationist Henry P. Kendall took a personal interest in the village and initiated many of the improvement projects which give the village its traditional New England Charm.

This page utilizes information from:

- *History You Can See - Scenes of Change In Rhode Island 1790-1910* written by Hadassah Davis and Natalie Robinson and published by the League of Rhode Island Historical Societies, Providence, 1986.
- *History of Textiles* - written by Perry Walton and compiled and written for John S. Lawrence, Boston, MA, 1912.
- *Working Water - A Guide to the Historic Landscape of the Blackstone River Valley*
Rhode Island's Mill Villages

Samuel Slater began the American Industrial Revolution when he constructed the first successful textile mill in Pawtucket in 1793. By its third year of operation, the Slater Mill had 30 employees, almost all of them children. Because large, poor families were an attractive pool of labor, Slater built housing to attract them. This also concentrated the work force within easy walking distance to the mills. Since mill workers had to buy everything that they needed to survive, Slater built company stores to provide for their needs. Paying wages in the form of credit at the company store also allowed him retain essential cash. To provide for his workers' spiritual needs, Slater built churches and established schools near his mills. These institutions were also used to socialize workers in ways that he approved.

On one hand, the creation of a company village was intended to be seen as the philanthropic act of a benevolent mill owner, a perception that would help to inspire worker loyalty. On the other, the enterprise had to be seen by investors as a justified expense, one that would ensure consistent profits by allowing management to control almost every aspect of the lives of its workers' lives. Every feature of these villages - their buildings, street layouts and housing - were the product of careful thought and planning.

In these villages, the mill owner alone determined the hours, earnings and physical conditions of the workers. Conditions often improved when the supply of workers was limited. Conditions often declined when workers were in great supply. In the early years of the American Industrial Revolution, many families realized an increase in their standard of living as they moved from farm to factory. In the process, though, they gave up self-sufficiency for a credit-based economy centered on the company store. In later years as the supply of workers grew, it was not unusual for owners to take advantage of their power over now dependant workers.
Even in the best times, life in the mills was difficult and unhealthy. The workday started before sunrise and ended after sunset. The air in the mills was full of flying lint particles that often caused respiratory disease. The mills were cold and drafty in winter, hot and humid in summer; dirty, noisy, and uncomfortable at all times. Corporal punishment by overseers was a common practice. The danger of working near machines was always present.

One of the best surviving examples of a company mill village can be seen in Slatersville. Slatersville was formed in 1803 when Samuel Slater and his brother John, in partnership with the Providence firm of Almy and Brown, purchased the land and began construction of a textile mill. By 1807, the village included the Slatersville Mill, the largest and most modern industrial building of its day, two houses for workers, the owner's house and the company store. It is easy to see how workers could spend their entire day in the quarter mile distance between the mill and the outskirts of this village.

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