

Water power fathered Stony Brook industry

By GORDON B. SEAVEY
WESTFORD — Two small streams separated by Oak Hill Ridge, Beaver Brook in Boxboro and Bennett's Brook in Shaker Village, for untold centuries have been the headwaters of Stony Brook.

And through centuries Stony Brook has meandered through a valley of plains and hills to reach the sea via the Merrimack River. Then by evaporation, these waters have returned to the land.

This natural recycling was a boon to the early settlers in this region for the rushing waters meant cheap and dependable power with which to grind grains and saw lumber, much needed staples for the Colonists. There was little other power on which to rely.

Although only twelve miles from these sources to the Merrimack as the crow flies, the drop in the elevation of over one hundred feet of Stony Brook meant that many small dams could be built along its course. Containing this water power along the valley proved most valuable to the early settlers. This was the beginning of a string of mills from Forge Village to North Chelmsford.

USING MATERIAL at hand, earthen and stone dams were first constructed, causing the waters to back up, forming mill ponds. Acting as reservoirs which could be tapped when needed, these ponds supplied the force to turn mill wheels and machinery even during the dry season. The ponds were small. Periodically the little mill sitting astride the brook would have to stop at times while the pond would refill.

Many old dams are visible today all along the valley. Some still make mill ponds. One is in Littleton, another at Shaker Mill Pond in Ayer.

Among early dam sites still exposed but not in use is one at Pingryville, a long side

Route 110. Another is at the little stone bridge over Gilson's Brook at the upper end of Forge Pond. A map of Littleton, dated 1795, shows that Gilson operated a saw and grist mill on this spot. The dam, built of fieldstone and earth, is still there, although it holds back no water. Also, is the fieldstone foundation of the mill. The mill pond probably was about three acres.

Earliest in Westford was a saw mill located on an outlet of Nabnasset Pond into Stony Brook as early as 1669. Forge Pond was dammed and a saw mill established there by Jonas Prescott in 1680. Later came a grist mill.

In the same general area, a forge was erected around 1710, making it the fourth or fifth enterprise of this nature in New England. More forges were added to make candlesticks, and irons and other household articles as well as used was bog iron ore ob-farm tools. The basic material tained from Groton.

These forges worked for nearly 150 years and soon the community took the name of Forge Village. This is the only town in the world so named. The quality of ore found nearby was poor and better products made elsewhere forced the closing of the forges during the Civil War.

Then was formed around 1865 the Forge Village Horse Nail Company which used water power for two decades to run trip hammers to form the nails. Farmers used the nails for shoeing horses, oxen and mules.

In 1879 the property was purchased by the Abbot Worsted Company. For years they made worsted yarns, mostly to go into carpeting manufactured in cities as far away as Philadelphia. During its nearly 100 years of occupancy, Abbot's added several buildings of substantial brick.

With the decline of the use of the type of wools processed by Abbot, the mills became idle for a brief period. Purchased in 1967 by Murray Printing Company of Wakefield, book lithographers, this multi-million-dollar concern specializes in quality back-and-white printing of books.

Orders turned out here have numbered as high as 1-2 million copies of one book. Featured are fine text books for educational purposes, trade books, reprints of former editions, some of the "best sellers" and the editions of paperback as well as book-of-the-month club offerings. Needless to say, water power is no longer needed in this modern plant.

With the advent of mills springing up all along Stony Brook Valley, it was natural that a railroad would come through the area. It started banks the brook. One of the communities it passed through was Graniteville, so named for the quarries in the hills nearby. At that time there

was but a handful of houses and the saw and grist mill of one Thomas Richardson.

Charles G. Sargent came from Lowell in 1854 and with Francis A. Calvert bought this mill and the water rights, and another mill town was developed. Ever since, C. G. Sargent's Sons has been making

machinery for processing wool and yarns. Abbot Worsted also operated a sizable mill.

Downstream, another early dam was located at Westford Depot. This was a grist mill operated by George Heywood and J. Henry Burbeck. Water power turned heavy

granite mill stones to process grains brought in by farmers. Corn, wheat, oats and bran were ground to order or bagged to sell for livestock feed.

To augment their supply, grains were brought in from the West by rail. The loaded cars were first dropped at a

siding, then with a pinch bar and a horse or two the car was rolled onto the main tracks alongside the mill, emptied and then returned to the siding.

All this was done in between the passing of regularly scheduled passenger and freight trains.

In 1910, the old mill was torn down and the old dam was rebuilt in its present condition, with two of the old mill stones capping the top. Could these millstones have been cut on Millstone Hill, now the location of Haystack Project?

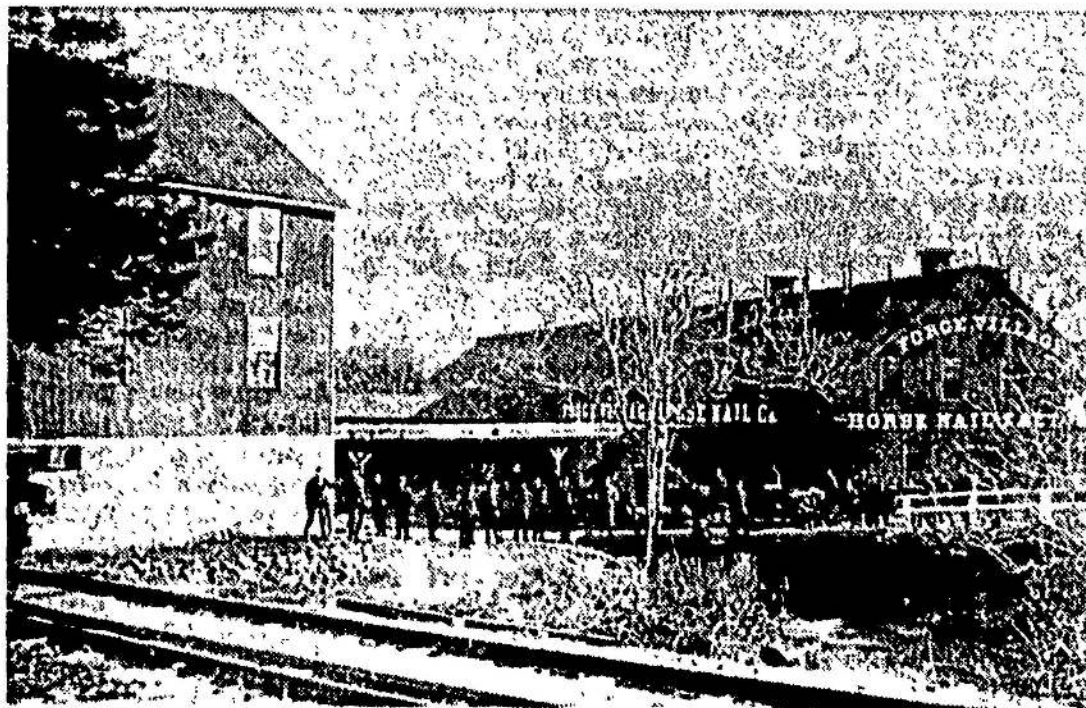
Two miles further downstream at Brookside, another dam furnished water power to a fulling mill which finished woven cloth. Later this became a woolen mill owned by George C. Moore which depended a great deal on water power. The plant is now a cold storage and food processing operation which ignores the use of water power.

STILL ANOTHER couple of miles below was another mill pond, from which water power was derived to fashion and grind scythes. This started in 1823 and the village, no West Chelmsford, was known as "Scythe Factory Village." During the Civil War it made swords and sabres. Under new ownership, the plant later

made files and machine knives, as well as ceremonial swords for fraternal organizations.

Near North Chelmsford, Stony Brook broadens into Newfield Pond, an area of about ninety acres and now known as Crystal Lake. An earthen dam funneled the waters from the pond to power the great mills at North Chelmsford. This pond is now dry pending decision to rebuild the dam.

With the advent of electric motors and steam engines, use of water power gradually diminished. This greater, more dependable power caused the demise of the water wheel. No longer can one watch surging waters pour from turbine outlets to rush downstream to power other machinery. For the most part, just as they did before the coming of the white man, Stony Brook now runs unharnessed to the sea.



Early Forge Village plant

A forerunner of sizeable industry powered by water in the Stony Brook Valley is the Forge Village Horse Nail Factory located in Westford. Trip hammers, for

nearly two decades until 1879, forged nails with which to shoe horses and oxen.