

Industrial era grinds to halt as company closes

Once prospered in area of mills on Stony Brook

By Gordon B. Seavey
Staff Correspondent

The demise of the C.G. Sargent's Sons Corporation, located in the Graniteville section of Westford for 135 years, is a blow to the town's industrial life.

Beginning in a small machine shop of wood located at water falls formed by Stony Brook, the company expanded over the years, probably reaching its peak after World War I.

Charles G. Sargent was the innovator. Employed as an overseer in the old Lowell Machine Shop, his decision to go on his own brought him to Graniteville in 1854 where he built his first shop on the south side of Stony Brook. He was interested in designing and manufacturing washing and drying equipment for the woolen industry as well as other equipment, such as wool dusters, pickers and waste carders.

During the same period, two descendants of an old Westford family, John W. Abbot and his son, John William Pitt Abbot, became interested in the wool processing business, capitalizing on the 15-foot drop of Stony Brook for water power to drive their looms.

They and Charles Sargent worked closely together as their businesses were compatible. A factory with considerable working machinery was always in need for repairs or improvements, and Sargent provided this skill.

The threesome then built a building at the corner of what is now North Main Street and Broadway, which they shared. Unfortunately this building burned in 1858. It was built two years later of solid granite, using blocks in a variety of sizes

and shapes taken from quarries on nearby Snake Meadow Hill. This solid building still stands.

More space

Sargent found that soon he needed more space. By 1877, he had built a new machine shop on the site of his original little shop, but of granite. He was then able to leave the Abbot compound for his new quarters.

It is to be mentioned that Sargent at one time had a partner, Francis A. Calvert, with whom he bought the water rights at the falls. It was estimated that at "full water," the flow from Stony Brook produced through the giant turbine at least 75 horsepower.

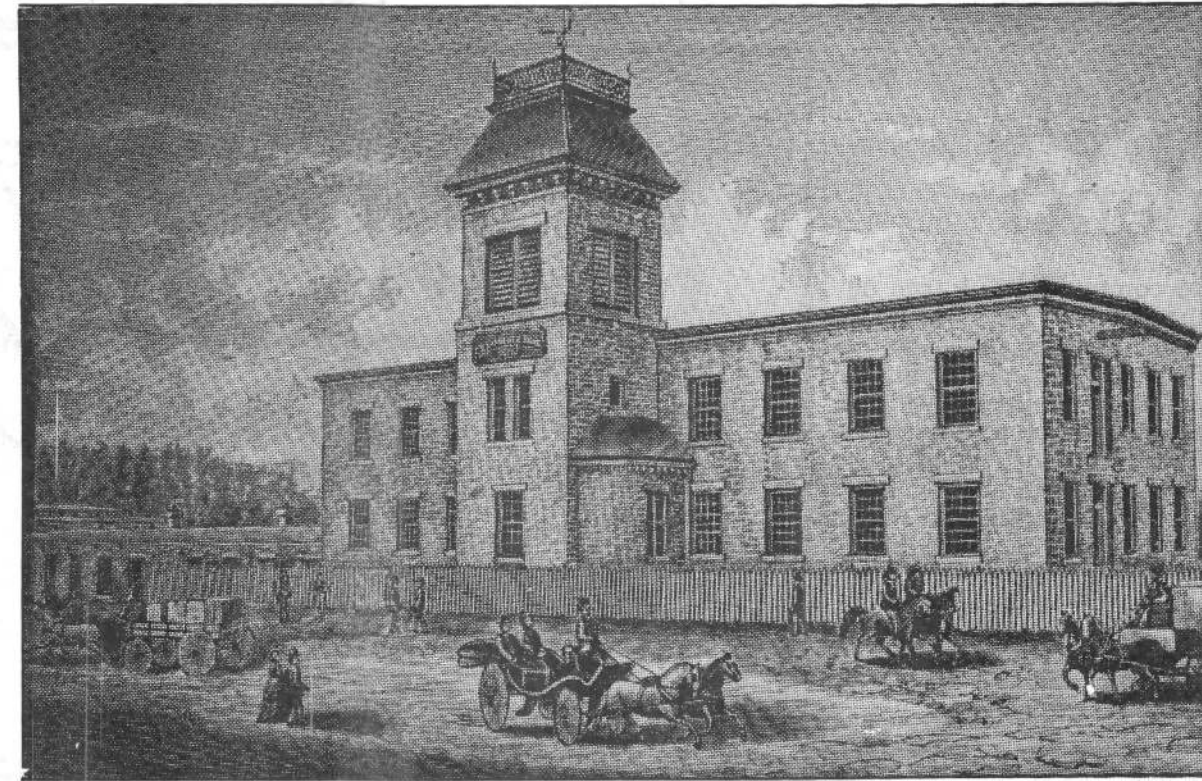
To celebrate the opening of their new mill, the villagers responded with a "Musical & Dramatic Entertainment" at which a three-act play entitled "The Little Brown Jug" was featured.

A quartet of local talent sang "Dreaming & Drifting," and at intermission Joe Wall brought the house down with his minstrel act playing the "bones." To the uninformed, this was a great minstrel act whereby the artist would accompany a minstrel song, such as "Traveling Back to Georgia" manipulating wooden clackers in both hands.

The program was scheduled for March 20, or "if stormy," on the next fair evening. The show began early, at 7:30 sharp, and admission was 25¢. At intermission, one could purchase oysters for 20¢ and ice cream a nickel less.

Machine builders

A page from the catalog of Sargent & Calvert issued in 1885 stated that they manufactured ring and table combing machines of their design, and worsted and wool-



Courtesy Gordon B. Seavey

A 19th-century etching depicts the heyday of the C.G. Sargent Company, when this sturdy factory building of local granite was constructed in 1877. The building still stands on Broadway Street.

len machinery in general. An illustration showed a worsted combing machine, known as the New England comber, one of the first machines in use in this country.

As Graniteville was not a well-known address, the company stated it was "Near Lowell, on the Stony Brook Railroad."

In one section of the plant, hosiery was knitted. Their principal business, however, was machines for turning wool into various products. To mention some, familiar probably only to the trade, were the wool duster, washer, dryer, burr picker, crabber, etc.

In later years, they engineered their products by manufacturing industrial drying machines for chemicals, foods, tobacco, textile and rubber processing, and were sold world-wide.

Sargent's inaugurated more recently a research and development laboratory which for its kind was considered outstanding in the area.

Much later a two-story office building with space for the draftmen and designers was built facing the shop on Broadway.

A foundry was built on Bridge Street, where the heavy castings were made.

In the meantime, the Abbots had

built a large extension to the 1860 mill, more than doubling the space.

Civic-minded

Sargent was a "mover" in the little community, originally designated as Stone Quarry because of the several granite quarries nearby. A more suggestive name for the hamlet, Graniteville, was made by Sargent and was soon adopted.

He later gave the land on which the Methodist Church was built in 1871. He was long a benefactor of the congregation. The edifice is built on the shore of the little mill pond formed by the damming of Stony Brook, and at one time mostly an apple orchard.

The Sargents built their homes on the opposite side of the pond, on a hillside. They still stand and are showpieces of the Victorian age in design.

The Abbots already were living in mansions in Westford Center when they turned to wool manufacturing. None of these residences is standing. Francis Calvert erected a Victorian home on upper Graniteville Road near the Abbots which is still located at 8 Graniteville Road.

Mrs. Vivian Sargent Smith, a third generation member of the family now lives in Florida with her husband, but maintains a summer residence at 7 Main Street.

In recent years, other large industrial concerns have either been sold or dismantled. Abbot Worsted Company, after making world history for 103 years, went out of business in 1958. At one time the Abbots operated the largest woolen mills in the world. In Graniteville, they employed 300 and in Forge Village about 800.

Another recent large industrial firm, widely known, was the H.E. Fletcher Granite Company which changed hands after being in operation for over a century. It sold most of its vast acreage in the northern corner of the town for a corporate industrial center which would include some 800 acres.

At Brookside, where a mill for grinding grains some 140 years ago and later the scene of the George C. Moore fulling mills, has closed.

With tongue in cheek, we must mention that the town's first factory, Jonas Prescott's forge at the outlet of Forge Pond founded in 1710, also met its demise.