THE BEGINNINGS OF INDUSTRY IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY DANBURY

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Most people know from souvenir maps and capsule histories that Danbury began as a tiny agricultural settlement in the vicinity of South and Main Streets in 1684 and grew in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to be known as the hat center of the United States. Few people realize that 200 years ago Danbury was the scene of a diverse range of activities that foreshadowed the advent of the industrial revolution.

Throughout most of the eighteenth century, Danbury was a steadily growing, agricultural community that included Bethel and the southern part of Brookfield. Along its main thoroughfare, Town Street, were the homes, shops, taverns and stores of dozens of tradesmen and merchants. These men constituted a prosperous middle and upper class that held most of the positions in the local government. Smaller centers of population in outlying districts were clustered around churches, taverns or general stores.

Three types of water-powered mills served the agricultural community: the essential gristmill, the sawmill and the fulling mill. The first gristmill is said to have been built in 1702 by Wakefield Dibble on Beaver Brook, where Route 6 crosses it. In the latter part of the century, Caleb Benedict and Major Daniel Starr also ran gristmills in this area. Starr, one of Danbury's richest men, owned a sawmill nearby and at his death had seven slaves who furnished part of the labor for his enterprises.

Sawmills were an obvious necessity where the land was being cleared for farms. A small wooden flutter wheel powered a saw up and down as a sliding carriage, propelled by a second wheel, moved the log along. Wood was also used in great quantities by the numerous local blacksmiths and particularly for the forges of the Ironworks that produced bar iron.

At the fulling mill, or clothier's works, a clothier cleaned and dressed pieces of homespun and locally made woolen cloth by subjecting it to a three or four day pounding by water-powered hammers in a vat where it had first been mixed with "fuller's earth". Following this, it was stretched out on tenterhooks (a wooden frame) to dry. The nap of the cloth was raised using a fuller's teasel, then it was cut into lengths and if necessary, dyed. These processes were later taken over by machines which duplicated those antiquated practices. Eventually the operations were unified and mechanized in the textile mills of the nineteenth century. No examples remain today of fulling mills. These mills shared the rivers and streams with tanneries which used local oak and hemlock bark, ground by horse-driven bark mills, as their tanning agent and supplied the many shoe, saddle, and harness makers.

During the American Revolution, sections of Danbury were burned by the British. One reason for Tyron's raid may have been the use

of the town as a base by a company of artificers-tradesmen of all description who supplied the continental army with materiel - wagons, barrels, casks, nails, harnesses, and shoes.

Following the Revolution, the new nation began a sustained and determined drive to free itself from imported goods. The growth of American industry was one of the first concerns of the government. Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of the Treasury, directed John Chester to inquire on the state of industry in all of the various towns large enough to merit concern. Inquiring in Danbury, he received replies from Joseph P. Cooke, selectman and merchant, and Oliver Burr, prominent hatter.

In the early 1790's, Governor Samuel Huntington of Connecticut commissioned William Blodgett to make a survey map of the state indicating the location of churches, roads, mills, forges and factories. These maps are extremely instructive on the economy of eighteenth century Danbury.

An area where Americans hoped to achieve self-sufficiency was in the production of iron and iron articles, especially nails. Cooke, in his letter to Chester in 1791, notes with satisfaction that the production of Danbury area blacksmiths had made them independent of imported nails.

During the eighteenth century, Litchfield county and adjacent areas in Massachusetts and New York were the leading sources of iron ore in America. Forges and furnaces abounded. Settlement of what is now Brookfield began around an iron works. A section of the town still bears the "Iron works" appelation, attesting to the initial importance of the resource to the community. Edmund and Ephraim Washborn erected an iron works on the banks of the Still River in 1788. It appears on the map, but was short-lived; it burned in May, 1791. The owners suspected a runaway apprentice of setting the blaze. Cooke notes in his letter to Hamilton, written in October that iron production was "liable to many disasters" and "requires the unremitting exertions of the Proprietors, and demands public encouragement".[1]

The story of the Washborns does not end here. In 1792 the brothers purchased a newly constructed paper mill in Beaver Brook from David Wood and Lazarus Beach. In this type of paper mill, linen and cotton rags, along with a few more exotic items like calves' ears and hide fleshings, were allowed to decompose. This process completed, they were pounded by water-powered hammers to create the "stuff", of which paper was made. The rotting created an odious stench which made the mills unpopular. The brothers sold the Beaver Brook mill to Seth Comstock in 1798, but retained ownership of a second paper mill in Mill Plain. This one was later burned by local residents unhappy with the stench and with the flooding that the mill dam caused. Comstock continued to operate the Beaver Brook mill, often leasing it out, until 1821 when it, too, burned.

Dams built originally for sawmills and gristmills were often later used as the site for a second mill. Such a case was the

linseed oil mill, located behind the present day El Dorado restaurant. Built in 1792, it shared a pond with an already existing sawmill owned by Samuel Wildman. Flax was grown extensively as a cash crop by local farmers in the eighteenth century. Its fiber was made into linen cloth while the linseed oil from flaxseed was used in paint and as a wood preservative.

The textile industry was another area of activity in eighteenth century Danbury. At least three companies set out to manufacture cloth at the beginning of the 1790's. One was John Joyce and Company, who advertised as a "manufactory" of linen, cotton and wool and was located on Town Street near Franklin. Another company was formed in 1791 by Comfort Hoyt and Thomas Tucker. Tucker was a well-to-do teacher, and Hoyt, a farmer, though he owned a sumac mill in the Shelter Rock area for the extraction of red dye. Cooke had high hopes for this company, which had purchased a spinning jenny, a carding machine and a fly shuttle. He noted that "they have manufactured several pieces of cloth which meet with a ready sale; the prospect is somewhat promising..."[2] The jenny was a crankwheel operated frame which could spin 8 to 11 threads at once. No records remain of the company. Judson White began making saddle cloth in 1790 and continued for a few years, but later turned to hatting.

The reasons for the success of hatting in Danbury were its relatively good roads, its proximity to New York City, and the presence of skilled workmen. Whatever the reasons, the last decade of the eighteenth century saw a boom in the hatting trade here. Farmers and tradesmen began to leave their former occupations and set up small hat shops. Oliver Burr and Company began hatting in 1787 with one apprentice and one journeyman. That year they turned out 551 hats. By 1800 Burr and Company employed 30 and exported 9,000 hats, almost half of Danbury's total for the year. Burr, in his reply to Chester, complained, however, that the poor workmanship of the proliferating new hatters was driving down prices and discouraging apprenticeship, and he asked for government standards similar to those existing by law in England. The supply of furs for felted hats was a problem for Burr since they were purchased by a man in Canada, shipped to England and then to New York before getting to him. Wholesale costs were consequently increased at each juncture.

By the turn of the century, Danbury had already acquired its reputation as the hat manufacturing center of America. Newly successful hatters began to appear in the government alongside of the merchants, the large farmers and the more successful craftsmen.

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Footnotes

[1] Papers of Alexander Hamilton, Vol. IX (Columbia University Press, N.Y., 1965) p. 335.

[2] Ibid.