Town River, Tidemills And The Quincy Canal

BY H. HOBART HOLLY

Amid Quincy's many historic sites, few reflect more important local history than the area where the old Quincy Canal emptied into Town River. Thousands of people pass the site daily on the Southern Artery without noting the reminders of three industrial activities that played important roles in the story of Quincy.

In 1800 this area was largely saltmarsh and meadow into which a tidal arm of the Town River extended up to the Road to the Ferry shortly to become the Hingham and Quincy Turnpike, and now Washington Street. Into this tidal waterway, under a bridge for the road, flowed the Town Brook near which was the center of the settlement from 1634. Nearby on Town River was the Town Landing, a most important place from the earliest days. The saltmarsh was itself a highly valued asset; people still relied heavily on salt hay.

Starting in 1802, Ebenezer Thayer (1786-1841), a merchant of Boston and Charlestown, shortly to be of Quincy, purchased about 39 acres of land between the Road to the Ferry and Town River. On the river he built two wharves; the present Quincy Lumber Co. wharf is their successor.

On June 23, 1806, the Legislature passed an act authorizing Ebenezer Thayer to build a dam across Town River "for the purpose of erecting a mill or mills on the same". That he carried
Quincy Canal

Continued from Page One

out this purpose is verified by mention of the mill pond when he sold his property in 1814 to David Stetson of Charlestown. The next year, Stetson sold the property to John Souther who carried on the several industrial activities there; he operated a shipyard, a wharf, a grist mill, a saw mill, and the canal lock.

John Souther was well established in his family's shipbuilding business in Hingham when he moved to Quincy in 1815 and built the handsome home still standing at 356 Washington Street. He and his son, John L. Souther, operated an active shipyard on Town River for nearly fifty years, building many important vessels.

In addition to the shipyard, the Southers operated the two tide mills - a grist mill, and close by to the east, a saw mill. Mill Street and Pond Street still commemorate this activity. The original grist mill burned and was replaced in 1854 by the building still standing over its old raceway as part of the Quincy Lumber Co. yard. The machinery has long been removed but the rugged mill building construction survives.

A sidelight on the grist mill is of interest. In present Braintree, from the days when it was Monatiquot Village and then the Middle Precinct of Old Braintree, there was a succession of mills on the Farm and Monatiquot Rivers. Present Quincy, however, the original center and then the North Precinct of the old town, is a distinct contrast. Here were operated just two stream-operated mills. The old Town grist mill operated from 1640 to the 1850s on Town Brook at Fort Square where a millstone monument commemorates it. On Furnace Brook was John Winthrop, Jr.'s Iron Furnace of 1644 which ceased operation after a short time partly because of the inadequacy of the waterpower. Thus this area had to use tide power. In addition to the Souther mill, there were two earlier tidemills on Black's Creek.

By the 1820's, Quincy's granite quarrying industry was reaching a status of importance, and transportation of the heavy material was a major concern. Economical transportation was available on sloops and schooners suitable for the purpose — like some built by John Souther — but getting the stone to tidewater and aboard the vessels presented a problem. The solution for the West Quincy quarries was the Granite Railway of 1826 which carried the granite to Bunker Hill Wharf on the Neponset River. Concurrent with the establishment of the Granite Railway was the formation of the Quincy Canal Corporation to provide facilities for loading stone from the North Common or Quarry Street area on the granite sloops and schooners. The canal utilized the tidal portion of Town River that extended up to present Washington Street.

On January 26, 1827, John Souther deeded to the Quincy Canal Corporation free passage through the dam which was erected by the act of Legislature of June 23, 1806, Souther to have full use of the mill pond for his mills, the lock and abutments erected by the Canal Corporation shall be kept in order by them, and no more than six inches of water from the mill pond shall be used for locking vessels. Thus it is explained how mills and a canal could operate on one set of tide gates.

The Quincy Canal operated for some years but, unlike the Granite Railway, it was not a financial success and its stockholders lost heavily. The granite-loading wharves, the tow paths, the mill pond, and much of the waterway have long since disappeared; but remains of the abutments and tide gate structures can be seen today near the historic tidemill building.

In 1873 the Southers sold the shipyard properties and their wharf to Wilber F. Lakin who converted it to a lumber yard. In this business it has functioned for over a century under Lakin, then Benjamin Johnson and the Johnson Lumber Co., and since 1912 the Quincy Lumber Co. John L. Souther sold the dam and mills to Johnson in 1888. Thus continues the long and important industrial activity on this site in historic Quincy.

(Mr. Holly, author of this article, is the society's historian and served as its president for two decades.)
Loaded stone sloop sails down river from the Quincy Canal in this rare 19th century photograph.

Parts of a disused tide-gate rot away in this early 1940's photograph, looking west from main section of Quincy Canal. Tide-mill building is at right of dam.
FROM THE BOTTOM UP: Renovation of the Basement Area of the Adams Academy Building.

By LAWRENCE J. YERDON
Executive Director

The Quincy Historical Society exhibits and stores within the walls of the Adams Academy a remarkable collection of tangible objects that reflect the rich historic past of Quincy. Due to the layout of the Academy Building, the basement, not always the most desirable place for storage, is the repository for artifacts not on exhibit, and for collection-related activities such as cataloguing, registration, conservation, and exhibit preparation.

Problems in the basement storage and work areas were many in 1978. Although much time, effort, and expense had gone into the renovation of the exhibit, library, office, and meeting areas of the first and second floors in the early 1970's, little had been done to improve the basement area for curatorial work and storage of the collection. Storage and work areas had been combined and squeezed into rooms designed long ago for other purposes. Insufficient makeshift shelving resulted in the precarious stacking and overcrowding of artifacts on shelves.

Day to day housekeeping, basic for good collection management, was complicated by the deteriorating masonry on the bare granite walls, and flaking plaster and cement from unpainted floors and ceilings. Provision had not been provided for the storage of everyday supplies used in the office, at the sales desk, and for maintenance. Nor was there an area with counters and a sink where basic care and conservation techniques could be carried out.

A fire hazard existed with a steam boiler placed in a large open area used for the storage of the collection and janitorial supplies. Only a few feet away in that open space were the storage tanks for 750 gallons of oil. The potential for a major and minor catastrophe existed and was unthinkable in its cost to the historic past.

The Staff and Board of Directors realized that a responsible approach to caring for the collection was the basis for every other activity of the Society.

Although a major basement clean-up had taken place shortly after the Society completed renovations to the first and second floors, it was decided a more ambitious program was necessary.

A consultant was engaged through the American Association for State and Local History's Consultant Assistance Program. Consultant George Bowditch, Curator at the Margaret Strong Museum, spent two days assessing the problems in consultation with the staff, volunteer curatorial aides, and Board members. Shortly after his return to Rochester, Mr. Bowditch sent a detailed report and plan for renovations to the basement.

Through the efforts of Building Committee Member Owen T. Trainor, of Owen T. Trainor Associates, plans were drawn for use by the contractor. Bids for the project were taken, and R. H. Lofgren Company was selected to carry out the project.

After completion of the basic renovation by the contractor, and inspection by Building Committee Chairman, Anthony Losordo, other Building Committee members were actively involved. Peter O'Connell, of O'Connell Brothers Construction Company, contributed paint to cover new and old areas, and Stephen Riccardi, of Riccardi Company, Inc.,
AFTER: After renovation, storage room 2 became clean and orderly, with new, painted walls, ceiling and floor, plus racks for orderly storage of the museum collection. (Oberg Photo)

Continued from Page Four

Contributed workmen to complete the painting project.

The results are amazing. The basement is now divided into three clean bright storage areas, each with new shelving and storage units and equipment to control the humidity levels. A laboratory area now exists in an area that once included a hallway restroom and small storage area, and is equipped with counters and a large sink for preparing and cleaning artifacts.

The Registrar, one of our most over-worked volunteers, was provided with a secure space to receive incoming artifacts. A multi-purpose room is now available as a meeting space for committees, and work area for staff and volunteers. Areas have been constructed for the storage of office, Academy Aides, sales desk and maintenance supplies.

The tangible results of the basement renovation will be easy to measure over the next few years. Much improved storage capabilities will result in a better managed and researched collection -- the basis for a solid exhibit program. Adequate and cheerful working spaces have already created a new spirit of professionalism in our volunteer staff. Most gratifying is a sense of confidence that the most stringent professional standards can be met by the Quincy Historical Society.

Welcome Help

The Quincy Historical Society's Museum was awarded a $11,350 Federal grant from the Institute of Museum Services in the fall of 1980, being one of 405 Museums selected from more than 1,500 applicants. The Institute, now in its third year, is the first Federal agency authorized to provide general operating support, as well as project support, to museums. The Institute provides grants to a wide range of museums. It is located within the Department of Education.

The Society has used grant funds to purchase conservation materials for use with the collection. Acid-free boxes, rolls, tissue paper, tape, etc. will be used to increase the preservation capabilities of the Society. Additionally the grant provided funds to employ a part-time staff member to supervise the Society's education programs and assist with the inventory and catalog of the Society's museum collection. William N. Twombly has been employed to fill the position of Museum Technician. He will develop day-time, weekend, and evening series programs, as well as work with the staff and volunteer curatorial aides in caring for and managing the collection.
Quincy And The Great Boston Fire

In connection with the 1972 centennial of the Great Boston Fire of 1872, there were accounts of engines going to Boston from places like Providence and New Hampshire. Why none from the South Shore we were asked. The answer was that Quincy and the other South Shore towns had no steamers at that time; and only steamers were of use in the Boston emergency.

That Quincy was involved, if unofficially, was noted recently in perusing a donation to our library — “The History of the House of Hovey”. In this unlikely source of Quincy

Vanished Quincy

Of the twenty Quincys that have existed in the United States most have faded away. The strangest fate of all befall Quincy, Tennessee:

It was listed in a 1834 gazetteer as being in Gibson County. As late as 1877 the postal service still acknowledged Quincy, Tennessee.

But somewhere between those dates the county became Crockett and Quincy became Alamo, a town now claiming 2500.

(Do you want to hear about the other 19 Quincys and what happened to them?)

A Basket Of American History

A most interesting bit of Quincy history has been donated to the Quincy Historical Society by Mr. David Skoler - his father's peddler's basket. It is a symbol of new beginnings and enterprise of which Quincy and America is justly proud.

Bennie Skoler was born in the Ukraine section of Russia in 1885. He came to this country and Quincy in 1900, alone, with little money, and no knowledge of the language and customs here. He supported himself by buying and selling small items. When he had saved enough, he bought his peddler's basket. He had become a private business man in the dry goods trade, and is so listed in the Quincy Directories. In 1912 he married Gertrude Grossman; another name that stands for enterprise and accomplishment in Quincy. In 1919 he opened his clothing and dry goods store on Water Street in South Quincy which continued in operation for sixty years under Mr. Skoler and his sons David and Sydney. Bennie Skoler died in 1964.

Through the years this peddler's basket has been a symbol of success the American way - to its owner, and now to us.

Graffiti left by the Adams Academy students was found on this brick pillar during the basement renovation described on Page 4. (Oberg Photo)

The Patriot Ledger which has recorded Quincy history for the past 144 years, is pleased to sponsor this edition of Quincy History.