



Quincy History

Quincy, Massachusetts

Quincy Historical Society

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Coach Lace - An Old Quincy Industry

By Miriam N. Marsh*

If you should use the term "coach lace" to any but the oldest persons now living they would certainly ask "What's that?" They would not even find the word in the dictionary for it was a trade name and like some of our modern trade names a twisting of a word out of its proper meaning. For it was not lace at all but bands of trimming two to three inches wide woven like carpeting and with a raised pattern in pleasing colors. It was used in the inside of coaches and chaises as a finish to the upholstery, as window straps and as holding loops. Vehicles in those days were brilliant affairs, painted outside with scrolls and other decorations and lined with fine upholstery. The trimming was an important feature and in the family of Wilson Marsh** at Quincy the weaving of this coach lace became a specialized form of domestic industry sufficiently flourishing to give maintenance to the family for forty years, beginning in 1797 and lasting through 1836.

The old Marsh homestead where it was carried on still stands on School Street, (No. 128) Quincy, near the corner of Marsh Street - a solidly built four-square farm house, two stories high, an ell on the west side. The original front doorway has been replaced by an anachronism of a portico with ribbed concrete pillars and the clapboards have been replaced by

*Miriam N. Marsh was born in Quincy on April 16, 1889, the daughter of Edward Breck Marsh and Iva O. (Nichols), Marsh. She was a great-great-granddaughter of Wilson Marsh through his son Jonathan. The family home was on Irving Place, now Burgin Parkway, for many years. She was graduated from the Woodward School for Girls and from Boston University. After active participation in the women's suffrage campaign of 1915, she engaged in teaching, social work and then many years in library work. She died on December 10, 1975 in Stoneham which had been her home for many years. She had turned over to Quincy Historical Society the coach lace business account books, the salesman's samples, and family papers that were the basis for her paper.

**Wilson Marsh, founder of the coach lace business, was born in 1750 and died in 1828. He was of the fourth generation from Alexander Marsh who settled here about 1654. His home still stands on School Street.



The Wilson Marsh Homestead on School Street

ugly siding. Built to stand alone it is now closed in by small houses and garages.

The weaving began in a small way in the ell of the house but in its heyday when several hands were employed it occupied a shop in the corner of the lot. The dye-house stood on the opposite side of the road on the banks of Town Brook whose waters must often have run luridly colored.

In a yellowed letter dated 1808 Mr. Marsh sets forth a few facts (provokingly inadequate) about household manufactory: "the observations I have made in the forty years I have been concerned in the business." He speaks of the ease with which it may be introduced. "This species of manufactory needs nothing to set it going but the example of a few respectable families in each town." Further on in the letter he says the necessary capital for an establishment such as his is three thousand dollars and that the goods produced amount to between four and five thousand dollars per annum as sold at wholesale. This amount "affords the retailer decent profits, gives the workman decent wages and the employer a comfortable living and a little more if industrious and prudent."

But here he is speaking of the

industry as he had built it up during many years, - first by weaving ordinary textiles and then by specializing in coach trimmings. There is a note of pardonable pride as he speaks of the present state of his business. "We have six looms, consume annually about 1,000 weight of sheep's wool, 700 weight of flax, and about as much cotton. We have two pair of wool combs, one copper kettle for dyeing which contains 75 gallons and one brass kettle for dyeing brilliant colors. We dye brilliant scarlets and crimsons, good greens, permanent blues, durable blacks and most other shades with more or less brilliance." He is justified in boasting of his colors for the book of samples which has come down to us shows gorgeous reds, deep indigo, pale turquoise, old gold, moss green, all beautifully harmonized in the designs. I am interested in noting this brilliancy of color as the English dyers of the same period complain that owing to the climate of England all the red dyes come out flat and dull although the same pigments were used which in Turkey and Tunis made dazzling red and carmine. The red of our sample sheet is a vivid scarlet. In sample 26 it is combined with black in a leaf pattern

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against a background of orange. The border is orange, black and white with lengthwise stripes of scarlet. Sample 36 has an acanthus design in pale aqua picked out with black against a background of old gold silk, an unusual but charming combination. Sample 63, the most beautiful of all, has a fern leaf pattern in moss green on a background of pale green with dashes of scarlet in the tracery. Sample 64 has a Greek key and rosette in turquoise and white against a dark blue background.

The blue seems to be the only shade

that did not stand up under wear for the son, Elisha¹, writes from Baltimore where he had gone on a selling trip that his customers complain of the blue and black lace because of fading very quickly so he advises his brother, Jonathan, not to make more of it. It is interesting to speculate whether this is the same blue dye for which their father had purchased the patent rights in 1801. A paper of that date certifies that John Perry's patent right for dyeing blue is conveyed to Wilson Marsh for his use and disposal in the town of Quincy by Adoniram Judson², agent for Noah Pond. If it was the same blue dye it must have been vexatious indeed to have it fade.

The twenty samples that are extant

are either conventionalized designs or floral patterns. Besides the fern pattern there is an oak leaf and acorn design and a lotus and scroll. There is no date to show when these were woven. The account books of 1800 suggest that the emblems of the newly formed republic may have influenced the fashion in trimmings as they influenced other fashions for we read of "Washington broad lace" and "Eagle broad lace". Could the former have been made for President Washington's coach? It is an attractive theory but the absence of any such tradition in the family disproves it. In reality the lace manufacturers sold their product to wholesale houses like Fairbanks and Loring of Boston who in

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Quincy Industries In 1837

In the appendix to Pattee's history, industries in Quincy are listed for the year 1837. Employment figures show 918 men and 75 women engaged in eleven industries. Before the days of the railroad and commuting to work, it must be assumed that most of these were local residents, although some were undoubtedly itinerants. A significant number of these were granite workers who were not Quincy natives but had moved here from other granite centers in this country and abroad. Since in 1837 Quincy's total population was about 3,000, the importance of industry as indicated is very significant.

From early colonial days everyone required at least a subsistence farm. Since one farm could support one family, every generation had to seek new land. Throughout the history of Old Braintree there were migrations from the town. Of the three precincts, the largest number of emigrants was from the South Precinct now Randolph and Holbrook, this being the most land-

dependent area, and the smallest number from the North Precinct now Quincy, this being the least land-dependent area of the old town. Thus it can be seen that industry has been important to what is now Quincy from the start.

Quincy industry was always dispersed geographically. There were but two stream-powered operations, namely the John Winthrop, Jr. Iron Furnace on Furnace Brook, and the town grist mill on Town Brook at Fort Square. This is in contrast to neighboring Braintree and Milton where industries centered on waterpower from the Monaquot and Neponset Rivers respectively. For power Quincy had to resort to tide mills, and to engage in industries that did not require power. Unquestionably Quincy's most important physical asset was its 27 miles of shoreline. The second great asset was granite, the shipment of which depended largely on saltwater transportation.

A summary of the 1837 list with numbers employed follows:

	Males	Females
Coach lace	7	16
Hats	2	1
Beeswax bleachery	4	
Coaches, harness, wheelwrights	36	
Boots and shoes	163	58
Tanneries	16	
Fishing	100	
Salt-mainly for fish industry	2	
Shipbuilding	50	
Granite	533	
Slate	5	
	918	75

The basis for the above list is not known but it does not include many business activities in which local people engaged. Many individuals engaged in

home industries. The boots and shoes industry, which was typical of most towns in eastern Massachusetts, started as a home industry - John Adams father was a cordwainer as well as farmer - and which after 1800 moved into factories. In addition to the Marsh business, there was a second small coach lace business on Penns Hill, and other weaving was done in many homes. Furniture and other products of wood which would later be made in factories were manufactured in home shops. Almost everyone had a trade.

The grist mill at Fort Square was still in operation in 1837. At the mouth of Town River, the Southers had a grist mill and a saw mill, both tide-operated. There were many blacksmiths, some serving the granite and shipbuilding industries, and others supplying iron products for more general needs. There were businesses that served the needs of the fishing industry that was centered largely at Germantown and Quincy Point. Supplementary to the granite industry was the Granite Railway, the Quincy Canal and the granite sloops and schooners that delivered stone up and down the coast.

The industries listed and the activities mentioned were productive businesses in contrast to the rendering of services and the barter in products that was the feature of the economic life in much of rural Massachusetts down to the time that the industrial revolution changed the way of life. The industrial life in Quincy that has been shown, together with its proximity to Boston, made the town less rural and more populous than other towns in the area, a characteristic reflected in the city of today.

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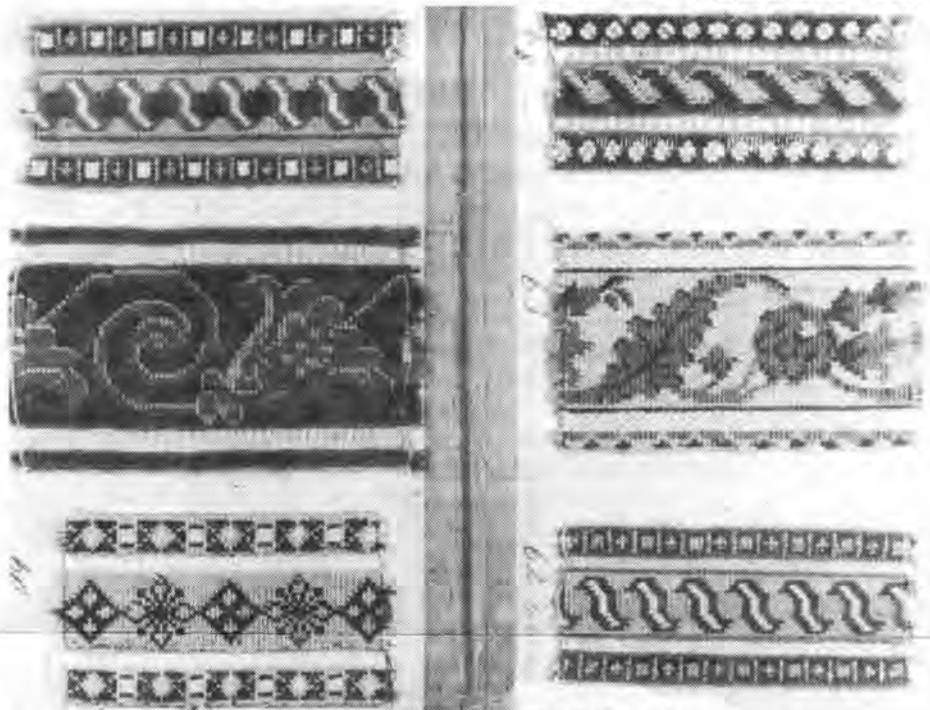
turn supplied the coachmakers, so unless there were special orders the weaver never knew whose chaise bore his handiwork. Washington lace may only have been the name of this red, white and blue design with vaguely suggested stars and bars and chevron. But what, pray, was "pantiloon lace" which they were weaving in 1801? No wonder Thomas Jefferson decided that a reform in male dress was overdue.

But the president's act of tearing the lace out of his sleeves had no effect on the fashions in coach lace judging from the account books. There is "pin lace", "diamond seaming", "chain lace", "rose half lace", "green and white rain line", "clouded lace", "variegated fringe", "scarlet tassels".

Of the dyeing of these colors Wilson goes on to say "We do little except for ourselves" and also "We make some cloth but this is at present a secondary business." I like to think that his slight tone of superiority is the pride of the master craftsman who has learned a highly skilled trade and rather scorns to do the more mechanical work. Yet in the lean years of the War of 1812 he was glad to eke out his regular business by the dyeing of garments and the pressing of cloth. The ledgers of this period survive and show work done for Madam Adams³. She buys six yards of brown cloth costing \$11.25; she has four yards of cloth dyed olive, and she buys one pound of warp for her own household weaving. He afterwards dyes and presses the woven cloth for her, charging \$1.65.

The prevailing color of that year seems to have been green but many orders are for dyeing garments black - mourning for the deaths that were so frequent in the large families of those days. Significant here are the entries in another book where one of the sons keeps a record of "time lost", that is, the time spent away from the shop on his own concerns. Funerals occur with startling frequency and often it is worded only "Funeral of Mr. Blanchard's child". Children often died in infancy before one had come to know them as Abby or Polly.

The business grew and prospered up to 1836. As William Pattee⁴, the Quincy historian, says, "The goods manufactured by this firm became noted as reliable and first class articles. This established reputation of their coach lace so increased their business



Marsh Coach Lace Saleman's Samples

that in 1836 they employed seven males and sixteen females and the value of the goods manufactured was estimated at \$12,000." Of the sixteen females two were Wilson's daughters, Anne and Susanna⁵, and the rest were young women of local families. The names are all locally familiar - Nightingale, Bass, Field, Brackett. Pattee writing in 1878 says "There are still among us elderly ladies who in their youthful days carded the wool and prepared the raw material, besides weaving much of the lace. They found this occupation a welcome source of income." It was rather a genteel occupation like the handicrafts of today. Wilson says in the letter quoted above, "I approve of the carding machine for wool as it exempts the softer sex from the most laborious and disagreeable part of the business."

Perhaps it was because they were "the softer sex" that they were given the cheaper grade of work to do. One of the men, Garrett Garrabrantz, earns more in four months than Mary Nightingale, the most indefatigable of the women weavers earns in a year. This was because "pasting and seaming" and "plain broad lace" and bootstrap paid only 6¢ or 7¢ a yard while the fancy broad lace paid 15¢ and 20¢ a yard. In one year, 1815, Anne Marsh averages \$9.95 a month Susanna averages \$8.00, Sarah Hardwick makes \$11.01, Mary Nightingale \$12.01 while Garrabrantz makes \$27.64 a month. These wages seem shamefully small until one compares them with the expenditures of the time. There have

come down together with the account books of the shop many receipted bills, all contained in a small hair trunk. One, a doctor's or apothecary's bill for the years 1805 to 1814 includes dentistry. "Extracting a tooth" is 25¢. "Two visits and medicine" are \$1.50. A shoemaker's bill items a pair of shoes for a dollar. There is a receipt in full for the rent of a farm in 1796 and the year's rental is \$20.28. Mary Nightingale's wages compare favorably with the salary of the village school mistress who received only \$58.00 for keeping the school 26 weeks. Another, Miss Bass, who evidently kept a dame school charges 12 1/2¢ a week per pupil with wood a dollar extra for the term of seventeen weeks. The higher studies were more expensive or the men teachers like the men weavers insisted on higher wages, for Jonas Evans "for tuition in the sciences of geography and astronomy - one course of lessons including stationery)" charges of \$2.50 and had his own personal bill head.

The sons of Wilson Marsh, Elisha and Jonathan, worked for their father on a yearly basis, a year's pay being \$300. with deductions for all the time spent away from the shop or their father's farm. Jonathan's record of Time Lost for the years 1821 and 1822 presents a homely chronicle of country life at that time. He spends various days haying, planting, hauling seaweed, moving a shed, killing hogs, banking the house (with the seaweed) but all this is in the

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way of work about his own place. Only rarely is the monotony of life broken by anything we would call recreation though "one day at a fire" was probably worth more than the fifty cents he was docked, for it meant grabbing his fire bucket and becoming a volunteer fire fighter. Election, town meeting, parish meeting, and Masonic installations had to be attended and as he was on the school committee there were several half-days visiting school or conducting examinations. There were a few meetings of Freemasons and what must have been a great day when the Masonic Temple was dedicated. Viewing the Cadets was a gala day and "training" meant the fun of putting on a uniform and attending muster. A half day "at a Vendue" or auction was exciting and I hope that "a day on the water" meant a long beatific day of fishing out in Quincy Bay. "To Hoff's Neck" refers to the present Hough's Neck where he had a sweetheart whom he later married⁶. Tradition has it that even in the coldest weather he walked the distance from South Quincy to the Neck and thus proved the ardor of his courtship. "On the pung" may have meant that for once he did not go afoot. One looks in vain for one bonafide holiday in the course of the year but he is even docked for Independence Day. Whatever it was that took him away, - his own illness, funerals, even the funeral of his own wife - is all added up at fifty cents for half a day, a dollar for a whole day and deducted from the three hundred dollars coming to him for a year's work. Either he was an over-conscientious workman or his father an over severe task master.

Years pass and then there are several entries that tell a simple and inevitable story. Jonathan Marsh married Sophia Spear in 1811 but in 1827 she died leaving six living children. The triplet daughters whom strangers came from far and near to see were now something more than an amusing show. Whom should he get to rear them? Fortunately for everyone Mrs Patience Bailey⁷ volunteered for the job. And that her services were satisfactory is shown by the entries for three successive years from August 1827 to August 1830: "Mrs. Patience Bailey, by the superintending my family 53 weeks - \$78.00". A dollar and a half a week for this strenuous job! But she was a widow with two children of her own and glad of

a home. After the last payment Jonathan had written in preparation for the following year, "By the superintending of my family ---weeks, from August 28, 1830 to ---. It breaks off there for it was never to be filled out. Jonathan Marsh married Patience Bailey in 1830. And he did wisely for Mrs Bailey tended his children as faithfully as her own and the two sets of children never thought whether they were own or half siblings. Mrs. Bailey died in 1841, aged 51, but the children all grew to adulthood, four to old age. Three of these were the triplets, Susan, Sophia, and Abigail, who all lived to be over seventy. The last survivor was Abigail whom this writer remembers visiting in the mid 1890's.

Meanwhile the affairs of the shop prospered. Wilson Marsh died in 1828 and the firm became Elisha and Jonathan Marsh. Elisha attended to the selling and travelled as far as Baltimore and Richmond. The one business letter of his that survives indicates a large stock of different patterns of Broad lace together with "seaming and pasting, fringes and tassels and tufts." The locomotive had been invented and railroad coaches seemed to furnish an unlimited market for coach lace. Circulars were sent to the railroad directors, advertising in newspapers was begun, and prosperity seemed established. The looms were kept humming to supply the demand for knotted fringe, variegated fringe, scarlet tassels and silk seaming.

Little idea had these enterprising craftsmen that they were riding for a fall. And yet to us looking back the end of their craft was apparent from the beginning. For the industrial revolution had already begun and the old domestic handicrafts were doomed to disappear. The shadow first fell on the weavers of narrow fabrics, those who made ribbons, laces, tapes, braids, galloons, for the chief mechanical problem of the power loom - the throw and catch of the shuttle - did not enter into the ribbon loom and so as early as the seventeenth century a machine for weaving narrow fabrics was invented. It was met with rioting and kept out of business until the next century but by 1786 we find the Dutch bar loom in general use. In the same year Cartwright⁸ invented his power loom for broad weaving, but workmen burned down his factory in Manchester and for several years prevented the success of his invention. When it was finally in operation the British government jealously guarded the secret of the machinery, and

Hamilton's⁹ high protective tariff on manufactured goods kept the home looms working. So for a while the industrial revolution was staved off. But native invention persevered and first a cotton factory with power machinery was set up in Waltham by Francis Cabot Lowell¹⁰, and then a machine to weave boot, suspender and girth webbing was installed at South Kingston, Rhode Island, by Rowland Hazard¹¹. This was a real threat to the lace manufacturers and they must have breathed with relief when it was found that better work could be turned out by the hand loom. But the enterprise was not abandoned and in 1828 a complete woolen factory with carding, spinning and weaving run entirely by water power was successfully operating. Another ten years respite and then the blow fell on our little branch of the industry. Shortly after the Marshes had built their new addition and before the new looms were in operation Erastus Bigelow¹² had invented a loom on which coach lace and carpetings could be woven by steam or water power. Competition was useless. For several years Messrs Marsh were busy marketing the wares on hand, slashing the prices, and then suddenly the entries are not of lace but of prosaic boots and shoes. The younger members of the family had turned the lace shop into a shoe shop and the old picturesque industry was at an end.

Notes

Miss Marsh's paper was annotated by Ruth H. Wainwright.

1. Elisha Marsh 1782-1847, salesman, and Jonathan Marsh 1787-1861, manufacturer, were sons of Wilson Marsh.

2. Adoniram Judson, agent for Noah Pond, was probably the Rev. Mr. Judson of Malden, father of the famous churchman.

3. Madam Adams would have been Abigail, Mrs. John Adams. She died in 1818.

4. *History of Old Braintree and Quincy* by William S. Pattee, Quincy, 1878, pages 520 and 521.

5. Anne 1784-1831 and Susanna 1794-1855 were daughters of Wilson Marsh. They both died single.

6. In 1811 Jonathan Marsh married Sophia Spear 1790-1827 daughter of Seth and Abigail Spear of Houghs Neck. They had six children including triplet daughters born October 20, 1815: Abigail Spear who married Moses Stone, and moved from Quincy, Susannah Savil who died single in 1887, and Sophia Arnold who died single in 1891.

7. On September 14, 1831, Jonathan Marsh married Patience Vose (Crane) Bailey, daughter of Henry Crane and widow of Whitman Bailey.

8. Edmund Cartwright 1743-1823, British inventor of a power loom in 1785.

9. Alexander Hamilton was Secretary of the Treasury of the United States 1789-1795.

10. Francis Cabot Lowell 1775-1817 of Waltham invented power machinery in 1814.

11. Rowland G. Hazard was a prominent manufacturer in Peacedale, Rhode Island.

12. Erastus B. Bigelow 1814-1879 was a Massachusetts inventor of weaving equipment including a power loom for coach lace.