**Tales from Mother Brook: Part 5 – Citizens**

By Judy Neiswander
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Writing in 1884, the historian Erastus Worthington concluded his history of Dedham by noting that “The greatest change in the inhabitants has doubtless been affected by the establishment of the woolen-mills at East Dedham, where the operatives live only for a time and then make room for others. But numerically these constitute a considerable proportion of the inhabitants.” The “operatives” Worthington referred to were immigrants.

Worthington was certainly correct about their impact on Dedham’s population. In 1800 the population was 1,973. By 1830 it had grown to 3,057 and by 1865 it had swollen to 7,198, at which point 27 percent of the residents of the entire town were foreign-born. Three quarters of the newcomers were Irish fleeing the mass starvation and disease caused by the 1846 potato famine. The second largest group were Germans who arrived in the 1850s. The streets named “Schiller” and “Goethe” between Bussey and Washington Streets, still known today as “Germantown,” indicate the area where many Germans settled.

The Merchant’s Woolen Company recruited men, women and children from all over Europe and North America. The 1880 Federal Census Records show that the bulk of the population in the Maverick-Colburn Street Area were Irish immigrants who worked at the mill. On Curve Street many of the residents were born in Ireland, but others came from Canada and Prussia. On Maverick Street, the residents were consistently first or second-generation Irish mill hands. Italian and Eastern European mill workers arrived in Dedham closer to the end of the 19th century. Families from the same area of the world would live in clusters of several nearby houses or together in one large boarding house.

Textile mills were dependent upon a steady supply of workers who were subservient to harsh conditions and the rigid regimen of the mill bell. In the 1830s and 40s, when owners and workers shared the same Yankee background, paternalistic mill owners enticed employees by funding schools, libraries, lyceums and other means of personal enrichment, although there is no evidence of such benevolence in Dedham. But as the textile industry grew more competitive, the relentless increase of mechanized production required unskilled operatives who were both compliant and powerless. Immigrants, desperately poor and accustomed to dehumanizing treatment, often had low expectations and few alternatives.

And yet, despite the punishing conditions, immigrants thrived in Dedham. Supported by their families and their faith - the newcomers were overwhelmingly Catholic - many families went from renting to owning their homes in the area. Sometimes families purchased several secondary homes that they rented to newly arrived fellow countrymen. The records reveal many examples, but one case in point was the career of Irish immigrant Thomas Murphy who lived at 27 Myrtle Street from 1872 until his death in 1907. Murphy arrived in the United States in 1850 and was identified in the Federal Census of 1860 as a 25-year old wool spinner who lived in a boarding house with over a dozen other mill hands. By 1870 he had been promoted to an overseer position in the mill and was the head of a boarding house where he lived with his wife and two sons. By 1889 he became Dedham’s Superintendent of Streets and a decade later was listed as a real estate speculator and contractor who made dozens of real-estate transactions. In 1882 he purchased land along High Street and laid out 20 parcels, ten of which would cluster around Hill Avenue. There he built speculative houses that he rented primarily to natives of Ireland; by 1910 approximately half of these residents would own their own homes. This pattern of established residents helping newcomers to flourish was characteristic of the evolution of East Dedham.

By the early 20th century East Dedham was well established as a bustling mill village, complete with schools, churches, residential neighborhoods, and a compact commercial district located at the intersection of Bussey and High Streets. But as the textile industry abandoned New England, moving first to the South and subsequently overseas in pursuit of ever cheaper labor, the mills of Mother Brook began to decline rapidly

In 1938 the massive walls of the Merchant’s Woolen Mill at the First Privilege, known latterly as Hodge’s Finishing Company and empty for 20 years, were knocked down into the foundation and Condon Park constructed over top. Only Mill No. 2 survives today as 202 Bussey Street, a tiny sliver of a once colossal operation. Originally the mill’s carpenter shop with spinning frames operating on the floors above, the building now houses several local businesses. Around the same time the Boston Envelope Company built its new facility, “the last word in ‘daylight’ factory construction,” over the footings of the old mill at the Second Privilege and colored the mill pond swimming hole with the dyes of its specialty products.



Fire at the Stone Mill, May 2, 1984. Collection of the Dedham Historical Society & Museum.

Fires ravaged sections of the Stone Mill at the Fourth Privilege in the 1980s, but the iconic structure was restored and adapted as condominiums, as was the Dedham Manufacturing Company Cotton Mill at the Fifth Privilege in Hyde Park. But it didn’t really matter anymore, for a wide range of employment opportunities was now open to the residents of East Dedham. Although Erastus Worthington had described them as “operatives” who lived there “only for a time,” they were immigrants and operatives no longer. Now they were citizens of Dedham.



Boys Swimming in the Mill Pond, no date. Collection of the Dedham Historical Society & Museum.

*If you have any connections to Mother Brook, its mills and the people who worked in them, including family stories and/or memorabilia – letters, pictures, diaries, scrapbooks, etc. – please send me an email at* *jneiswander@gmail.com**. We want to make our research into Mother Brook and its history as comprehensive as possible.*

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