

William H. Knight

A village that is noted
For its woolen twist and twill,
'Tis the pride of Massachusetts
And they call it Saxonville.

Excerpt from "Saxonville" by J.P., Date Unknown

As a lifelong resident of Massachusetts, regions whose affiliations are not readily apparent always intrigue me. I had heard of Saxonville over the years and wondered about it. *Was it a town unto itself or part of another community? Where did the name come from? Why was it significant enough to warrant its own historical preservation commission?* Saxonville is, in fact, the oldest section of the town of Framingham. Its establishment as a village with its own name was the result of the talent, vision, and perseverance of immigrant William H. Knight whose work turned what was originally known as Stone's End into Saxonville.

Industry along the Sudbury River followed the needs of this region just 20 miles outside of Boston. Settler John Stone was the first to harness the power of the river by erecting a gristmill at the Great Falls of the Sudbury River in 1650, which endured until 1795 when it was converted into a sawmill. In 1811, it was converted into a cotton mill under the auspices of the Framingham Manufacturing Company on the heels of nearby Westborough native Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin.

However, "The New England textile industry soon realized that cotton was not king." (Herring, 2000, p. X) The chilly climate of the region required a warmer material for clothing and bedding in the form of wool. In 1822 Abner Wheeler and his brother Eliphalet bought out the Stone family's interest in the ancient mill site at the falls. They knew they would need specialized technology to build the machinery for a woolen mill. England had developed this

technology, but was jealously guarding it. To get around this, the Wheelers hired William H. Knight.

William H. Knight was a thirty-two-year-old Englishman with experience in the field of textile mills. The Wheelers hired him as the first superintendent of the mill in 1824 and the operation was christened the Saxon Factory Company. The word Saxon referred to the breed of sheep that would supply the raw wool, and ultimately became a name that the town embraced. An 1827 Town Meeting referred to that area of Framingham as the Saxon Factory Village. It was soon shortened to Saxonville.

However, William Knight was not content to merely be the steward of someone else's shop and soon looked to move on. He set his sights on becoming a business leader in his own



right. Based on his skill as a mechanic and ability to successfully harness the power of water for textile machines, he sought someone with capital and management skills. His search took him to Connecticut where by 1825 he partnered with a politically connected lawyer named Henry Ellsworth.

“Together, they constructed a mill that used waterpower to card and spin wool and handlooms to weave carpet. They brought weavers and their families from Scotland and built housing for them. The carpet was sold wholesale to dealers in New York and elsewhere.” (Tariffville, 2009, ¶ 3)

At first, Knight and Ellsworth benefited from circumstances that worked to their advantage in this venture. The Tariff Act of 1824 had just been enacted.

This new protective tariff law unintentionally created a special opportunity for weaving wool carpets in America. Congress was only trying to protect both sheep farmers and woolen mill owners when it raised the tariffs on raw wool to 30% and on woolen goods to 33 1/3%. There were no domestic makers of woven wool carpets at that time. Sheep farmers raising the new Merino sheep for high quality wool were helped by this tariff. However, raising tariff rates for both raw wool and woolen goods had little net benefit for existing mills, because they made woolen cloth from high-quality wool, now made more expensive either domestic or imported. Carpets, however, could be made from low-quality wool, even scrap wool, available cheaply, so the new tariff on woolen goods greatly increased the incentive to make domestic woolen carpet. (Tarriffville, 2009, ¶ 2)

Once again, as had happened in Saxonville, Knight was involved in a venture that resulted in the development of a town that was named to reflect the industry – Tarriffville, CT.

Although prosperous for a while, the Connecticut venture ultimately failed. By 1829, Knight had returned to Framingham and bought the privilege of spinning cotton thread from Col. James Brown. Knight, however, changed the machinery and set out to finally be the master of his own shop in the manufacture of wool carpets. He also married into a local family by marrying Elizabeth “Betsey” Stone of the Stone family. She proved to be an asset to her husband by not only bringing local connections, but also a New England work ethic to their humble beginnings. As is often true of immigrant success stories, William Knight’s achievements are based upon individual talent that blossomed through hard work.

“His means were limited, and not at all commensurate with his skill. He would purchase wool sufficient for a single piece of carpeting, work it up, and take it to Boston, and from the proceeds buy more wool. He furnished a room in the upper story of the factory where he lived. And it was not an uncommon thing for his wife, from her window to catch the fish necessary for their frugal repast.” (Temple, 1887)

However, by 1845, just fifteen years after his modest beginning, Knight’s enterprise had expanded to, “...three mills, which consumed annual 465,000 lbs. of wool, producing 199,037

yards of carpeting, of the value of \$149,530. The mills gave employment to 191 males and forty-one females.” (Temple, 1887,) It is no surprise his business was booming, as his expertise was noted in the recognition of his carpet samples submitted for judging at the 1844 Exhibition of the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association in Boston. It was adjudicated by a panel of experts from throughout the country and Knight’s two pieces of Superfine Ingrain led to a unanimous decision of the committee that, “...those offered by Mr. Knight were decided the



As a prominent figure in Saxonville, Knight sat on the committee to build the Atheneum in 1846.
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best, being of a very superior quality for this grade of goods.” (Association, 1844, p. 98) Additionally, his Worsted Twilled Venetian Stair Carpeting prompted the committee to, “take pleasure in noticing that these specimens, as they consider them of very superior make, and deserving the highest consideration.” (Association, 1844, p. 98)

In 1834 the citizens of Boston were dying of impure water and looked outside of the city to find an abundant supply of fresh water. They found these in the

waters of the Cochituate Pond held by Knight. It took years of research for Cochituate Pond to be deemed the selected source, and on March 30, 1846 the city of Boston took both, “... the water privilege and the extensive manufacturing establishment connected with the pond, both in the possession of Mr. William H. Knight.” In his 1847 *A History of Framingham*, Barry notes that there although there were “misgivings” from the community over the loss of industrial prosperity, there was a prevailing sentiment that it was for the greater good to save the dying of Boston and reports that the terms of the purchase were, “liberal and mutually satisfactory to the

parties.” (Barry, 1847, p. 146) The city of Boston offered Knight the option to sell the water rights for \$100,000 with the option for the buildings for \$50,000. Knight took the option and received \$150,000 for the sale.

Despite the sale, Knight did not abandon industry at Saxonville at that time. Instead, he undertook a three-year lease of the lands, buildings, and machinery from the city of Boston beginning in 1846 and still produced woolen carpets. By February 1847, however, he was in negotiation with the nearby New England Worsted Company. The company manufactured yarn, but was increasingly left with a surplus at decreasing value due to carpet manufacturers producing their own yarn. They contracted with Knight to sublet his buildings and take over carpet manufacturing and remaining stock on the condition that he agreed for the time of the lease, “...not to engage directly or indirectly in the manufacture of any such carpeting as he is now making.” (Massachusetts, 1864, p. 282) Both parties agreed to an inventory of materials



This is the only factory building remaining after the fire.

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and conditions of lease, with tenancy beginning on March 1, 1847.

However, the paperwork had not been signed when a fire consumed the buildings on March 20th leaving the liability and insurance in confusion.

The case went before the Massachusetts Supreme Court with Knight as the plaintiff against The New England Worsted Company to

settle the issue of who was in possession of what at the time of the fire. “The jury returned a

verdict for the plaintiff, for his whole demand, amounting to \$43,443.76.” (Massachusetts, 1864, p.283) Of course there was also the matter of Knight informing the city of Boston of the loss of their recently acquired mills:

On the morning of March 20th, the following note was received by the Commissioners.

SATURDAY MORNING.

GENTS,—I am sorry to inform you that the two Carpet Factories have been destroyed by fire this morning. All had been regular respecting fires and lights. Nothing done which could injure the Insurance.

Yours, in haste,

(Signed,)

W. H. KNIGHT.

William H. Knight's correspondence to the Boston Commissioners of the fire that destroyed the buildings he had recently sold them for \$50,000 and was now leasing back from them. (Bradlee, 1868, p. 105)

By the time all this had happened, Knight had already embarked on another endeavor. As early as 1845 he had gone into partnership with Mr. Armory Maynard, a native of Marlboro, MA who had also been deprived of waterpower by the city of Boston at Ford Meadow Pond in Marlboro. Together they founded the Assabet Mills on the Assabet River. Assabet Village was part of Sudbury and Stow. Prior to that the region was primarily agricultural with one small mill. The area grew in economic importance during this period due to the industry of the mills including the construction of significant new road and bridge in 1848 to facilitate the operation of the mill and the Union Congregational Church on land donated by Maynard and Knight in 1853. Although Saxonville had remained part of Framingham, Assabet Village grew to need lights, sidewalks, police, advanced schools and other accommodations that the parent towns of Sudbury and Stow were unable or unwilling to supply. The village was incorporated as a town in 1871 over the objections of Sudbury who resented the loss of the mills. In naming the new

town, they decided to honor the man, "... who developed it from a sparsely settled farming district, which he found in 1846, to the live manufacturing town of 1871." (Gutteridge, 1921, p. 8) As Knight had retired in 1852 at age 60, the town was incorporated in the name of his partner Maynard. Assabet Mills remained the world's largest woolen factory until the 1930's.

Knight's part in the success of another endeavor was a demonstration of the important contribution that knowledge, appropriate risk-taking, and perseverance have in any immigrant establishing themselves in a new land. He harnessed the resources of this new land by not only literally harnessing a powerful water source for a textile mill in the Industrial Revolution, but also by harnessing the opportunity that the growing country afforded those who were ready and able to work towards achievement. Although neither Saxonville nor Tariffville nor Maynard are named for Knight, his productivity and achievement influenced them all.

Five C's	PRIMES
<p>Context: Industrial Revolution</p> <p>Contingency: New England Mills required Knight's technology from England</p> <p>Causality: Framingham had the power of the Sudbury River and Falls, as did Tariffville and Assabet Village have similar water resources</p> <p>Change Over Time: Knight evolved from skilled immigrant to local industrial leader</p> <p>Complexity: His technology lead to the development of three villages/towns.</p>	<p>Intellectual/Technology: Knight had knowledge of industrial technology from England that was needed in the US</p> <p>Economic: His establishment of mills created the economic basis for industry in three regions</p> <p>Social: The success of his mills created the need for more villages and towns to be established</p>

Annotated Bibliography

Association, Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic. (1844). *Exhibition*. Boston, MA: Crocker and Brewster.

This is the publication of the results of the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Exhibition of 1844. It was held in Boston and featured the evaluation of manufacturers and the mechanic arts.

Barry, W. (1847). *A History of Framingham, Massachusetts including the plantation from 1640 to the present time*. Boston, MA: James Monroe & Co.

This is a history of Framingham written by the former pastor of the First Church in Framingham. It is a narrative that is very readable with information on all aspects of Framingham up to the 1840's.

Bartlett, J.G. (1918). *Gregory Stone genealogy: ancestry and descendants of Dea. Gregory Stone of Cambridge, Mass. 1320-1917*. Harvard., MA: Stone Family Association.

This is a compilation of family genealogy commissioned by the Stone family. It includes not only the birth and death dates, but also brief notations of occupations and noteworthy accomplishments.

Bradlee, N.J. (1868). *History of the introduction of pure water into the city of Boston: with a description of its Cochituate water works*. Michigan: A. Mudge.

This provides the information about the need for and acquisition of fresh water by Boston with data as well as supplemental information, including W. H. Knight's brief message about the burning of his mill buildings he was leasing back from Boston after they had just purchased them for \$50,000 in addition to the water rights for \$100,000.

Gutteridge, W.H. (1921). *A Brief history of the town of Maynard, Massachusetts*.

Maynard, MA: Town of Maynard.

This is a history about the town of Maynard including the establishment of the Assabet Mills and the formation of the town of Maynard due to the mill causing increased industry and commerce in the region of Assabet, which up until that time was a village on property in Stow and Sudbury.

Herring, S.W. (2000). *Framingham: An American town*. Framingham, MA: Framingham Historical Society.

This is a narrative of the history of Framingham from its settlement by John Stone in the 1600's through to contemporary history. It features the contributions of significant residents including Crispus Attucks and Christa McAuliffe as well as defining conditions including the Framingham Heart Study. It is a great resource for all things Framingham.

Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. (1864). *Massachusetts reports: cases argued and determined in the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts*. Boston, MA: H.O. Houghton and Co.

This is a report on the court case of the suit Knight brought against The New England Worsted Company. Knight had sublet his buildings and machines and sold his surplus stock to the company. The company took possession on 3/1/09 without officially signing papers, leaving the liability and insurance in doubt when a fire destroyed the buildings and damaged materials and goods on 3/20/09.

Maynard Web. (n.d.) *Mill History*. Retrieved February 18, 2009 from

<http://web.maynard.ma.us/history/mill-history.htm>.

This is an account of the founding of the town of Maynard as a result of the establishment of the Assabet Mills by Knight and Maynard including Maynard's continued impact after Knight retired.

Tariffville Village Association. (n.d.) *History*. Retrieved February 18, 2009 from

http://www.tariffville.org/history/TVA_mill_village_of_tariffville.htm

This is a brief account of the enactment of the Tariff Act of 1824 that spurred the formation of the New England Carpet Company and in turn the founding of Tariffville, CT.

Temple, J.H. (1887). *History of Framingham, Massachusetts: early known as Danforth's Farm, 1640-1880, with a genealogical register*. Framingham, MA: Town of Framingham.

This history of Framingham is available online in .pdf form from the New York Public Library and is searchable in that form at
<http://www.archive.org/stream/historyofframinged00temp/historyofframinged00te>

[mp_djvu.txt](#) *It is valuable as a historical resource that was written as contemporary to the period as possible with a publication date of 1887. It encompasses narratives of daily life, as well as data for research and reference.*