

This digitized version of Tom Beardsley's article is made possible by The **Willimantic Public Library**. All Tom's articles and much more Willimantic history can be accessed at the library. We are grateful to the copyright owner, "**The Chronicle**" for permission to reproduce this article. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

10 ALBUM, Chronicle, Saturday, December 14, 2002

— HISTORY —

# Phineas Turner: Overlooked but not forgotten

*Part one of two parts*

Phineas Turner (1819-1903) is one of the most significant, but overlooked figures in eastern Connecticut history. He built a prosperous silk mill village in Hebron, and he was the vice president of the New York to Boston Railroad. Also often overlooked is the fact that silkworm nurturing and silk thread spinning and weaving was an important part of the economy of Windham, Mansfield, Coventry and Hampton and Scotland during the 19th century.

Phineas Turner was one of eight children born in North Coventry to Anson and Hannah (Gurley) Turner at the Spring Manor farm on the Willimantic River. The Turners were unsuccessful in mulberry tree growing, and relocated to the mother's family farm in the Gurleyville section of Mansfield in 1830. It was here in the hot-house of early American silk manufacturing that young Phineas gained valuable experience.

Thanks to his uncle Ebenezer

Gurley's influence, Mansfield's pioneer silk manufacturers **M a r s h a l Dimock** and **Nathan Rixford** hired Turner to sell their products. He was unsuccessful at this first attempt, so he purchased a large flock of sheep with the idea of supplying the region's expanding woollen industry.

Sheep raising proved to be unsuccessful, so Ebenezer Gurley convinced Dimock and Rixford to give him a second chance. They subsequently sent him to New York City in 1845 as the sales agent for their products. Turner became an highly successful salesman in New York, and asked Dimock and Rixford to make him a partner.

Believing him a young upstart, they refused. Turner left their employ and sold silk for his uncle Ebenezer Gurley and Deacon



*Tom  
Beardsley*

Clark, manufactured in the Gurleyville silk mill. Business grew and in 1851, Gurley and Clark rented space in Major Swift's mill at Mansfield Hollow. Shortly afterwards, the partners returned to Gurleyville and brought Turner to take over the Mansfield Hollow concern.

Phineas Turner planned to increase production, but needed more waterpower. He entered into a bitter lawsuit over water rights with Englishman Edmund Golding, who operated a silk mill further up the Fenton River.

Turner was successful, but Swift, the owner of the mill, refused to sell it to him. So in 1853, Turner purchased the water rights and several hundred acres at Hebron's North Pond, now known as Amston Lake.

Turner demolished the existing sawmill, gristmill, blast furnace building and worker housing and built an expansive silk mill. For almost 30 years he successfully manufactured sewing silk, which was exported across the world, but in 1885 he retooled to manufac-

ture silk ribbon.

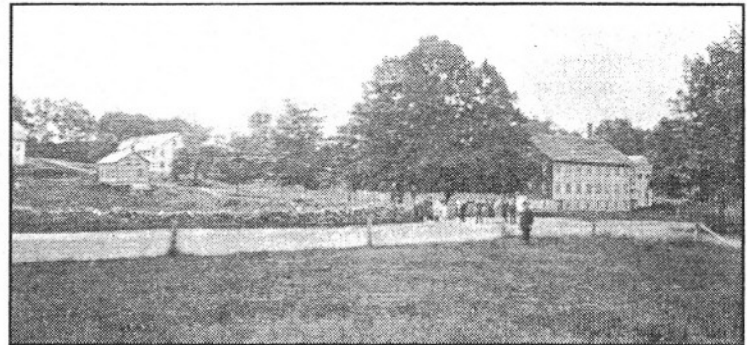
This was a highly complex operation, so Turner went to the city of Basle, Switzerland, which was then a world-renowned center for silk ribbon manufacturing. Upon arrival he purchased Swiss ribbon weaving looms, and hired 40 silk ribbon weavers, and shipped them all back to Turnerville.

However, Turner had to sign an agreement with the Swiss weaving guild in Basle not to reveal Switzerland's ribbon-weaving techniques. He also agreed with

the guild that only his Swiss weavers could operate the looms.

The Turnerville-manufactured silk ribbons were a tremendous success, and in 1886 Turner decided to increase production. He hired several women from Marlborough, and instructed a Swiss weaver to train one of the Yankee women, but she refused saying that she could only pass on her ribbon-weaving skills to indentured apprentices. Trouble loomed.

*Continued next week*



*The Turnerville Mills and farms in 1894.*