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— HISTORY —

Phineas Turner: A man with silk in his blood

Part two of two

Phineas Turner (1819-1903) had silk in his blood. His mother's family, the Gurleys, were silk manufacturing pioneers, and greatly assisted him in becoming established in the industry. After working in sales and manufacturing at Gurleyville, New York City and Mansfield Hollow, Turner established a silk manufacturing mill and community at Hebron, which he named Turnerville.

Turnerville was on the old stagecoach route between Colchester and Andover, so in 1858 Turner petitioned the federal government for permission to open a post office, and Montgomery Blair, President Buchanan's postmaster general, granted him the franchise, a position he would hold for many years.

During the Civil War, Turner was in charge of securing Hebron's quota of troops, but was accused of allowing the wealthy sons of families to avoid the draft. After the war he became a prime mover in the building of the first direct railroad between New York City and Boston.

Turner became the vice presi-

dent of the railroad, and spent a fortune in ensuring the line would pass directly through Turnerville as it was being constructed between Middletown and Willimantic during the early 1870s.

He was successful, and proudly built a railroad depot and storehouse in his village. Turner also convinced Hebron's reluctant selectman to foot some of the bill for the lines construction.

In 1875, Turner was informed that in recognition of all his hard work, that the Air Line directors had voted to name one of the line's steam locomotives "Phineas Turner."

As recounted in this column last week, in the early 1880s Turner decided to switch production from silk thread to silk ribbon, so he purchased specialist Swiss machinery and hired a Swiss workforce.

Unfortunately, the Swiss workers were a little more stubborn



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than his mainly Irish workforce, and they refused to train new workers in silk ribbon weaving techniques. Turner became belligerent with his Swiss weavers, so they went on strike. Tensions mounted, and after a bitter confrontation, a gunfight ensued.

The Swiss weavers chased Turner out of town, but he returned later with police and militia, and the striking Swiss were herded into a boxcar. The ringleaders were arrested and imprisoned, and Turner subsequently dismissed all Swiss workers. This early attempt at globalization failed miserably, and Turner turned to more trustworthy French Canadian, Irish and Yankee workers.

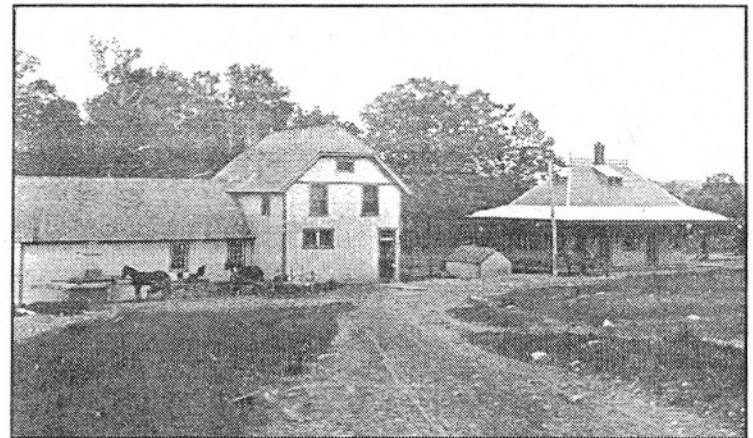
In 1894, Turner was removed from his position as postmaster during President Cleveland's second administration. As stubborn as ever, Turner refused to vacate the post and was only removed after a lengthy trial. In that same year Turnerville, located partly in the three townships of Hebron, Lebanon and Colchester, was described as a tract of 2,000 acres, "a little world of itself" consisting of three silk mills, comfortable dwellings, boarding house, store,

schoolhouse, post office and a livestock farm with 10 horses and 100 head of cattle. The spring water that fed the North Pond was piped into every house in the village.

Phineas Turner died in 1903, and his silk ribbon mills ceased production in 1907. In 1912 Charles Ams purchased the mills, water rights and mill village, and renamed Turnerville Amston. Ams retooled the silk mills and began manufacturing automobiles known as Ams-Sterling Roadsters. Between 20 and 30 were manufactured, but owners

experienced numerous problems and the car manufacturing plant closed down in 1917. Turnerville, or Amston became a summer resort between the wars. The old Air Line railroad brought summer visitors from Hartford, and Amston's rural-industrial nature changed as holiday homes sprang up on the banks of the old North Pond.

However, remains of Turners old silk mills and worker housing can still be detected. It would make a fine project for an industrial archaeologist.



Turnerville's Air Line Railroad Depot, 1894.