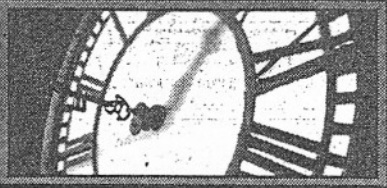


## Local History



# Iron comes to 'Willimantuck'

In 1718, Ephraim and Daniel Sawyer of Windham approached the town selectman and asked permission to establish a forge on the "Willamantuck" River to manufacture iron. The selectmen subsequently granted the Sawyers a tract of land under the proviso that within two years they would build an iron works there. The land was located adjacent to the river at the "Sliding Falls," a large smooth boulder where water smoothly glided or slid over it in a continuous sheet.

The old stone bridge, replaced by the Thread City Crossing in 2000, now occupies the sliding falls site. The stone bridge, soon to be adorned by a garden, was built by the Willimantic Linen Co. in 1857 and it replaced the old wooden "iron works bridge," which was regularly destroyed or damaged by spring time freshets.

The Sawyer family failed to erect an iron works to produce the versatile "master metal" at the sliding falls site. As iron was very expensive to import, the town selectmen looked further afield to attract investors. In 1726, John Devotion of Suffield, Mass., purchased 2 acres of land on the northeast side of the Willimantic River from Ebenezer Babcock, adjacent to the sliding falls. Devotion provided the finance for the Daniel Badger and Co., which he organized to manufacture iron.

Badger hailed from Coventry and Devotion and the other partners, Samuel Hathaway and Joseph Kellog, came from Suffield.

The Badger Co. purchased shares in an iron mine, located at nearby Mansfield, from Deacon Nathaniel Skiff and in the summer of 1727, Samuel Badger built a dam at the sliding falls site to provide the waterpower to drive the bellows at the foundry. Constructed from stone and standing about 8-feet high, the works' forges smelted the iron-bearing rocks by means of charcoal fires. At the end of 1727, the Willimantic iron works consisted of two forges and a 20-foot long, 25-foot wide charcoal house and the entire concern was valued at 800 English pounds. It took three tons of ore to produce one ton of iron, which the Badger firm sold for two shillings and sixpence a ton or proportions thereof.

The Badger Co. sold the iron works in 1729 and it changed hands during the next 15 years, coming into the possession of the Hartshorn, Ripley and Dyer families. When Thomas Dyer purchased it in 1731, the site included a dwelling house and livestock,



Tom Beardsley

which Dyer described: "The house I now dwell in, standing by the Willimantic River at the Iron Works, has utensils of iron, brass, puter, and household stuff consisting of beds, bedding, chest, trunks, chairs and tables. There is also one white mare a red and black yearling colt with a white face."

Dyer sold the iron works in 1735 and for the subsequent decade, parties based in Massachusetts owned and operated the forges. Floods severely damaged the iron works in the mid-1740s; and the Massachusetts owners abandoned production.

Jedidiah Elderkin acquired the site in 1776 to manufacture gunpowder at the site "whereon formerly stood an Iron Works." Fifty years later, Asa Jillson acquired the location and built a machine shop there adjacent to his mill, where he commenced the manufacture of cotton thread.

While excavating at the site in 1824, the Jillsons found evidence of the old iron works in the form of cinders, iron, lead and pieces of machinery. An examination of the ore found there revealed that it was low quality bog ore, which contained only a very small proportion of pure iron. This probably explains the short life of Willimantic's first industries, which concerned the manufacture of iron and gunpowder.

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.