

Take a look at Atwoodville, where silk was once king



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Tom Beardsley stands near the head race and stone arch at Mill 2 in Atwoodville, where the silk-sewing and silk-throwing industry once flourished. Mill 2 was built in Mansfield in the mid-1850s.

Atwoodville is located adjacent to Route 89 and the Mount Hope River in Mansfield, just north of the Mansfield Hollow reservoir. In the 19th century, it was a thriving manufacturing village, producing high-quality sewing silk and silk-throwing machinery.

The 1830s "silk craze" came to this section of Mansfield in 1835, when William Atwood and Henry Crane built a small water-powered mill (Mill 1) on the banks of the Mount Hope River to manufacture thread from home-grown silk, but later by imports from Japan and China.

By 1850, the Atwoods had profited enough to finance the building of a larger, more modern mill (Mill 2) several hundred yards up the river, and they worked closely with local architect Edwin Fitch to design and build it. A section of Mill 2 was specifically set aside to repair silk machinery.

The new mill was operated by William's son, John Edwin Atwood, who subsequently trained his son, Eugene, in the

nuances of silk machine design and construction.

John Atwood amazed his contemporaries with his scientific, mathematical and mechanical genius. He was considered an eccentric in agrarian, mid-19th century Mansfield, particularly when he forecast automobiles and airplanes. Toward the end of his life, he published his philosophy in a volume entitled "The Constituents of the Universe."

In 1863, John and Eugene transferred the silk machine building and repairing business from Mill 2 to a workshop in Conantville. In 1870, as their business prospered, they built a large factory on Valley Street in Willimantic. They built their world-renowned Atwood silk-spinning frame in the Willimantic mill, and patented it in 1875.

The Willimantic factory burned down in 1876, and the

Atwoods relocated to Stonington, where the Atwood Machine Co. grew to be the largest builder of silk-throwing machinery in the world.

In 1861, Atwoodville's vacant Mill 1 was leased by a Scotsman, John Macfarlane (1808-1882), who had managed the Campbell Silk Mills in Glasgow. Macfarlane emigrated to the U.S. in 1848, and arrived in Atwoodville via the Foss & Jenks silk mills in

Camden, N.J., and the Cheney silk mills in south Manchester. John Macfarlane was assisted by his sons, John, George and James.

The Macfarlanes built a thriving industry on the foundations laid by the Atwoods. They moved upstream to the larger, vacant Mill 2 and manufactured silk thread there until a terrible fire consumed it in 1877. James Stewart Macfarlane, John's son, continued the business after his father's death, and in 1889, he rented space in the Chaffee silk mill on Church Street in Willimantic. He continued to manufacture machine-twist silk in Atwoodville's Mill 1 up until his death in 1919. Mill 1 was pulled down in 1928.

The remains of Mill 2 — the Fitch/J.E. Atwood-designed 1850-77 silk mill — in Atwoodville are in almost pristine condition, disturbed only by Mount Hope River trout fishermen and deer, because of the site's almost inaccessible position between the river and the Nipmuck Trail, and its distance from the highway. The site is crying out for an archaeological dig. Anyone interested?

Tom Beardsley, a free-lance public historian, was the scholar-in-residence and co-director of the Windham Textile and History Museum from 1990 to 1995.

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