

Phoenix Mill
North Bank of Still River
Phoenixville
Windham County
Connecticut

HAER No. CT-3

HAER
CONN,
8-PHOE,
1-

MEASURED DRAWINGS

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Engineering Record
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

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CONN,
8-PHOE,
1-

PHOENIX MILL
CT-3

Location: North bank of Still River, 500 feet southwest of intersection of U.S. 44 and State Route 198, two miles south of Eastford vicinity (Phoenixville), Windham County, Connecticut.
UTM: 18.741920.4639860

Date of Construction: 1823

Present owner: Old Sturbridge Village

Present use: Mill is to be removed from present site, outfitted with reproduced 1830's machinery, and re-erected on a water-power site in Sturbridge, Massachusetts.

Significance: One of few remaining New England country textile mills of the 1820's, this stone cotton mill was adapted for twine production in the 1860s.

Historian: Richard M. Candee, August 1974

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A B R I E F H I S T O R Y O F
T H E P H O E N I X M I L L

The Stone Mill at Phoenixville, in the town of Eastford, Connecticut, was the second cotton factory of the Sprague Manufacturing Company, when it was built in 1823. The company was founded by two Rhode Islanders, Rufus and Pardon Sprague, in partnership with four residents of Ashford (from which Eastford was later separated), during the cotton mill building boom which accompanied the War of 1812. By 1813, a red, wooden cotton mill was built south of the "Connecticut-Rhode Island" turnpike (present Route 44) and two years later, a new road to the Eastford Meeting House (present Route 198) was built. Within a short time, the Sprague Manufacturing Company was incorporated and built at least one two-story house and a factory store north of the turnpike, as well as a sawmill and grist mill on the opposite side of the Natchaug (now the Still) River, somewhat below the first factory.

Like a great number of Rhode Island-system cotton factories after the war, the Sprague Company suffered financial difficulties. By 1820, new owners had acquired the property at a sacrifice price. The small factory at that time employed 6 men, 11 women, and 16 children on both mule and throstle spinning equipment (1608 spindles) and eight power looms. It manufactured brown shirting and sheeting.

Under the new ownership, the Sprague Manufacturing Company expanded, acquiring in 1823 two pieces of land south of the old factory, including a site which appears to have held a wool carding mill. By the fall of 1823, the "dam across the sd river" and the "Stone Factory" are first mentioned in a deed granting water rights from the trench (or race) to an abutter. Little documentation survives from this decade. However, when one Joseph B. Latham applied for work at the Wilkinson's Pomfret Manufacturing Company in nearby Pomfret (presently Putnam, Connecticut, in 1826, the agent noted:

Jo^s B. Latham--Wheelwright at Ashford
Factory, eastford, wishes to build our
water wheel. he built the wheel at
ashfd 14 1/2 feet Dia[met]er--12 feet
floats for \$275 and f[oun]d himself.

In that same year, Ashford deeds mentions James H. Preston and Gidding W. Keyes as agents for the Sprague Manufacturing Company, although it is unclear if the former was replaced by the latter, or whether the title referred only to the signatory for real estate transactions. By 1829, the town tax on the "Sprague Factory" lists both factories (each valued at \$25,000) and 11 houses. All this, together with the sawmill, gristmill and store, was sold the following year when the company, like so many other cotton mills during the general business decline of the late 1820s, fell into bankruptcy. A full inventory of the machinery and tools in each mill, taken in 1830 for the "benefit of all the creditors of the Sprague Manufacturing Company" shows the "Stone Mill" to have contained 18 looms, 6 throstles, two mules and related equipment in the two major stories, turning lathes probably in the basement, and a "Dresser in attic story." The factory was heated by "5 stoves." In addition, the inventory notes the existence of the store, notes due the company, and their share of stock in the "Ct & Rhode Island Turnpike."

In December of 1830, the bankruptcy trustee sold the entire holdings to a group composed of one local resident, one from Hampton, and another from Middletown, Connecticut; two from Long Island and James H. Preston, the former agent of the Sprague Company, who was listed as a resident of Hartford and Long Island. The latter sold two parts of his 5/16 share of the new firm, now called the Phoenix Manufacturing Company, to John H. Preston of Hartford and Lorenzo Bullard of Ashford. Originally, the major participant among the new owners, James H. Preston, seems to have continued as the company agent, adding new looms by 1831 and increasing the family labor force to 85 men, women, and children. Yet, only two years later, he was dead, and, perhaps because of this, the Phoenix Manufacturing Company was advertised for sale by the new agent, John H. Preston, and Mr. Truman Beckwith of Providence. Although the advertisement was apparently unsuccessful in finding a buyer, it does provide the best description of the property and a commentary on changes made since 1830.

Like many others, the factory was said to be "situated on a never failing stream of water and the privilege perfectly secure from freshets, and affording an ample supply of water at all times." The "premices" were advertised as consisting of:

11 dwelling houses, about one half calculated for two families each, 1 large and convenient store, 2 barns, 2 wood houses, waste house, blacksmith shop, and all other necessary out buildings--2 large and commodious Factories, containing 1800 spindles, thirty-six forty inch looms, and the proportionate amount of machinery, and all now in full operations. Said machinery has mostly been new within the last year, and of the latest improvement, and the remainder thoroughly repaired, which makes it all equal to the best improved machinery-- it is a neighborhood where fuel and other necessaries for the operator can be procured at a lower rate than in any other section of the country, which, with its other privileges, will enable the operator to manufacture goods as cheap as any establishment in New England. There is also connected with said establishment a grist and sawmill in good repair; and at about 100 rods a first rate dam, and convenient place for building, and water power sufficient to operate 2,000 spindles. It is also a first rate stand for a country store, as the present proprietors are desirous of closing their business, would feel disposed to sell on good terms, and require but a small part paid down.....

Without a buyer, the company sold off a few small lots to neighboring landholders and in 1840 took a mortgage on the land and machinery. The mortgage shows that the machinery specifically in the stone mill, exclusive of that in the old Red Mill, included 20 looms, 16 cards, seven spinning frames, three mules all with attendant machinery; and the picker and three lathes in the basement as listed a decade earlier. Tax lists for 1841 and 1844 show part of the company's other assets: 10 houses (one less than previously), the store, one horse, and the two factories on 60 acres of land.

In 1844, once more, the company fell into receivership. The new owners, Clifford Thomas and Benjamin Warren, "partners and manufacturers in trade in S. Ashford," improved the mills with more new machinery and financial support from Hiram Thomas of Pawtucket, Rhode Island. By 1855, Hiram Thomas seems to have acquired the whole property and begun to dispose of it in parcels to several Eastford residents. In 1869, he sold to J. C. Randall and Edwin Harris the idle "Stone Factory and dwelling houses" on six acres of land. A map of Phoenixville of the same date describes the stone mill as a twine factory.

In 1891, the mill passed from the Harris heirs to Simeon A. Wheaton. "For a time, Mr. Wheaton continued the manufacture of twine, but the business began to decline and the spindles again became idle. Later Mr. Wheaton installed a Grist Mill on the lower floor. During World War I, the machinery from the three floors was sold and the second floor was used as a Dance Hall." This reminiscence by Wheaton's granddaughter, the wife of John H. Smith, who sold the abandoned factory in 1969, contains the most succinct history of its later years of disuse. In 1971, Old Sturbridge Village announced that it had purchased the factory building after determining that the deteriorated structural condition effectively defied long term preservation in situ. The Museum's plan calls for the removal and re-erection of the stone mill on a waterpower site in Sturbridge, Massachusetts, and the outfitting of the factory with 1830s machinery reproduced, in part, from remnants of production equipment found in the Phoenix Mill and which Old Sturbridge Village acquired in 1969.