

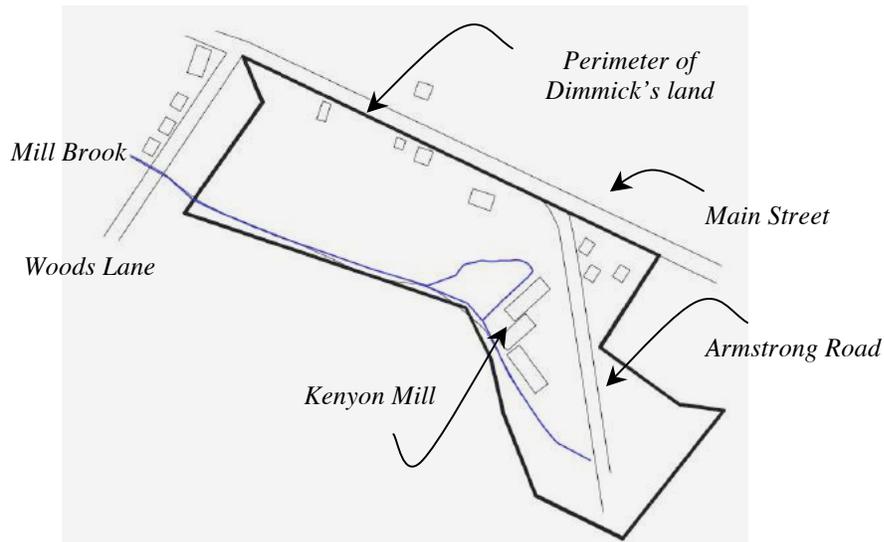
***The History of the Kenyon Mill
Armstrong Road
Coventry, Connecticut***

By Bill Jobbagy, May 2006

In the year 1837, South Coventry was emerging as a thriving mill village coinciding with the growth of industry in the northeast. Six water-powered mills were operating on the Mill Brook in the area from today's Lake Street to Woods Lane. They included (in order from the lake) a carding machine shop, a grist mill, a cotton (sheeting) mill, a saw mill, a machine shop, and another cotton factory. Another mill, making satinets, was operating at the foot of the brook where it crosses today's Depot Road.

Prior to this, a large tract of land extending roughly (east to west) from today's Woods Lane to Armstrong Road, which did not exist then, and (north to south) from Main Street to High Street, was owned by Captain Daniel Dimmick (later spelled Dimock). Daniel was a sixth generation Dimmick (in the colonies) descending from the elder Thomas Dimmick who came to Barnstable Massachusetts in the early 1600's. Daniel was father to Timothy Dimock who was a prominent citizen and physician of Coventry, and whose name now graces the Booth & Dimock Memorial Library.

Daniel died in 1833, and his heirs sold a sixteen acre portion of his land (on the Mill Brook) to Chauncey Griggs of Tolland (later Coventry), who sold it four years later to Joseph Newton Dow, Fredrick A. Strong and Edward Mathewson, all of Coventry. Mr. Strong was previously associated with the Springfield Armory. Daniel was a successful farmer who used much of this tract as a mulberry tree orchard. On the site were his home and a "silk house". The mulberry tree is a prime habitat for silkworms, and he cultivated the cocoons for sale to nearby silk mills in Mansfield and elsewhere. Coventry was not to see a silk mill until 1854. The "silk house" was likely the place where women processed and unwound the cocoons to a thin silk fiber suitable for twisting and weaving. 1837 was also significant for a few other reasons. A general depression was sweeping the country due to a rash and unfounded monetary decision by President Jackson, and a blight was beginning to kill the mulberry trees in Connecticut. Mr. Dimmick also built a small dam on the brook simply to create a pond for storing water. A sketch of that site overlaid on today's roads and buildings is shown here.



In 1838, Mr. Mathewson relinquished his share in the site to Mr. Dow. A few years earlier, Mr. Strong had been associated with Mr. Hezekiah Edgerton, in a machine shop upstream (near today's Bradbury Lane), which was sold a short time earlier. Mr. Dow lived in the house that stands today at 940 Main Street. Mr. Strong lived across the street near Woods Lane, and Mr. Edgerton lived on Lake Wangumbaug near the town green.

Published reports indicate the industrial activity here began in 1840 with a machine shop making wool cards on an upper floor, and a forge and trip hammer (run by Mr. Strong) in the basement. At this time, the production of wool cards consisted of making simple machines consisting of several rotating drums upon which were installed thin protruding wires that essentially "combed" raw wool to successively finer and more aligned fibers suitable for spinning into yarn. The mill brook ran in a slightly different path than it does today. Its course was about 100 feet closer to the road then, and not until the larger dam was built some years later did the brook and separate tail race assume its present course.

The basement forge and trip hammer was sold to four successive individuals in the period of 1842 to 1853 for amounts ranging from \$500 to \$900. These individuals included Calvin & Royal Manning (local businessman), Solomon Bidwell (builder of the Bidwell Hotel) and John Cummings and Samuel Dimock. In 1849, Mr. Dow entered into a partnership (and mortgage) for his machine shop with Loring Winchester, Hezekiah Edgerton, and Ephraim Dunham. Mr. Winchester was a local financier and lived in the house at the end of Woods Lane, then called Winchester Lane. The 1850 Federal Industrial Census lists J.N. Dow producing 50 wool carding machines at a value of \$18,000 that year. He was capitalized for \$21,200, used water power and employed twelve hands.

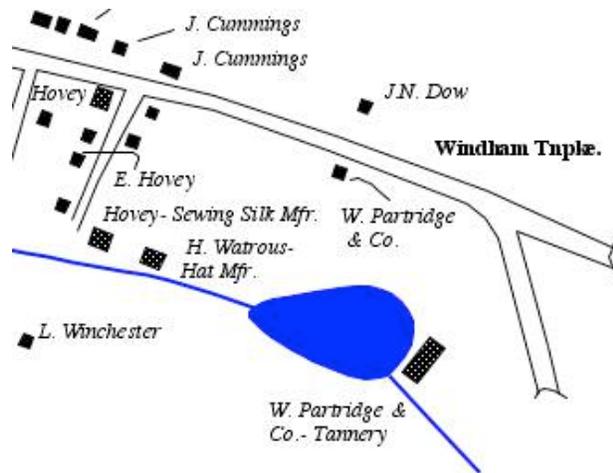
In 1850, Mr. Dow sold the machine shop for \$5,000 to John Boynton and his son John W. Boynton. The deed indicates a new shop has been added to the old one, and the machinery included lathes, tools, an "engine", and a water wheel used to build woolen machinery. The original building was two stories with a basement, made of stone and brick, and measured 63 by 35 feet. The elder John was a very prominent businessman in town in the early 1800's, and at one time held an interest in two-thirds of the manufacturing operations in South Coventry. His residence is now the Welles Agency on Main and Lake Streets. Three years later, Mr. Boynton failed to pay a mortgage on the site to the Tolland County Bank, and the assets were foreclosed to the bank. In December of 1853, Mr. Israel Kinsman of New York City purchased the entire site (the machine shop from the bank and the forge from Samuel Dimock) which consolidated the operations here for the first time. He furnished the building for the purposes of operating a tannery which, according to published reports, was not successful. A year after starting, he mortgaged the site for \$4,000 to William and Alfred Partridge of New York City and by April of 1856, the mortgage had been foreclosed in favor of the Partridges.

In July of 1857, Mr. Samuel Moredock enters the picture. His origins are not known, but he will become a principal operator of the mill site in future years. He purchased a hatters shop and dwelling on South Street near Wright's Mill with Alfred Partridge (see above) under the business name of The Coventry Shading Works. No further reference has been found to this business or this relationship.

In April of 1858, Al Partridge sold the site with the buildings and the water privilege for \$6,000 to Samuel Moredock. It also included land and a dwelling just north of the pond on Main Street.

By December of 1858, the factory contained machinery to make cloth including carding machines, spindles, shears, brushers, satinet looms, a fulling mill, knappers and a cloth winder.

Its interesting to note that in 1858, Mr. Dow, who sold his interest in this manufactory eight years earlier, had purchased the factory and water privilege just downstream of here and began a second career, lasting twenty-one years until his death, producing wool carding machines. The site that he operated would eventually become the Armstrong Wagon Works.



The 1860 Census lists Mr. Moredock employing twenty-four hands using water power to make satinet. (140,000 yards that year valued at \$42,000). Satinet is a thin inferior satin or imitation satin made of cotton warp and woolen filling, chiefly used for trousers. Mr. Moredock is listed on the 1860 town tax assessors list owning the mill, four houses and 75 acres of land. Two of the houses are residential dwellings. The other two are likely the first tenement houses for the mill. A mortgage that year lists the machinery in the mill as sixteen satinet looms, two jacks, six carding machines, two fulling mills, two shearing machines, a brusher, two knappers, a gig machine, a picker, a flock grinder, a duster and a steam engine. (A gig mill is essentially two rotating cylinders in close proximity holding compacted teasels that nap the cloth, which is to raise a fuzzy surface on the cloth. A teasel is a prickly plant used as a natural comb.)

In April of 1861 the Civil War breaks out and continues for four long years. South Coventry's manufactories contributed huge amounts of ammunition, in the form of percussion caps, and material for uniforms for the army. {Note: The Willimantic Journal reports in July of 1863 that Anson Grover of South Coventry (more particularly South Street near Judd Road), a member of the 12th Connecticut Volunteers, has come home on short furlough on account of the death of his wife. He has traveled from the battle of Port Hudson, just north of Baton Rouge, Louisiana on the Mississippi River. Port Hudson was the site of the longest siege in American History (48 days) and resulted in the death of thousands of soldiers. Mr. Grover reported that no one from Willimantic or Coventry had been killed in that battle.}

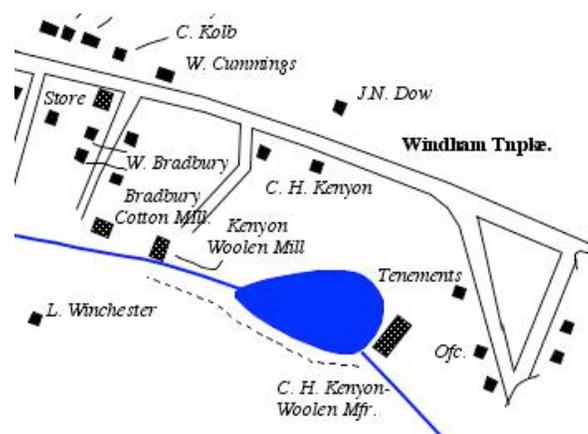
Records from the Willimantic Journal in 1863 make these references to Moredock's operation. "Jan. 16, Moredock is running full time on flannel." "Jul. 3, Moredock's woolen mill in South Coventry was burnt last Saturday together with a large share of stock. Loss quite heavy. The building was insured for \$9,000, the stock for \$12,000. Cause of the fire is not known. This the second time that Mr. Moredock has been burned out." "Dec. 4, Mr. Samuel R. Moredock of South Coventry, whose woolen mill was burned down for a second time a few months since has, with his characteristic energy, built a new factory in place of the old one, and will in the course of two or three weeks have a set of machinery ready to commence operations. We understand he intends to manufacture tweeds."

The new factory referred to by the Willimantic Journal remains today as the northern two-thirds of the old mill building on the site, though at that time it was two stories instead of three. It was built by Mr. Moredock on the existing foundation of stone and brick. The basement has fifteen foot ceilings. The walls are two feet thick and have a number of windows on the longer sides. It is removed from the dam about ten feet. In December of 1863, Mr. Moredock enters into a \$10,000 mortgage with Tolland County Bank, and by April of the next year, the bank quit claims the site to Charles H. Kenyon of North Stonington for the same amount and releases Moredock of his mortgage commitments. Later in 1864, Moredock takes ownership of the mill just upstream, also making woolens, and names it the Globe Mill. He operated this mill until late in 1867 when he sold it to C. H. Kenyon.

Charles H. Kenyon was born in Richmond, Rhode Island in 1824 to Lewis and Ann Kenyon. Lewis owned a mill on the Pawcatuck River that dressed and finished cloth. Charles' older brothers, Elijah and Abiel, carried on their father's business and expanded it to carding, spinning and weaving cloth. They also erected the Laurel Glenn Mill in North Stonington which Charles became involved with in his 20's and finally purchased in 1863. In 1864, Charles purchased the mill site in South Coventry. It is likely that he lived in Coventry only for a short time, if at all, and all mill business was conducted by agents. In 1881, he began to manage the Bozrahville Cotton Manufacturing Company in a most successful manner.

The 1870 Federal Census lists Kenyon employing 74 hands, using thirty horsepower of water power and making 275,000 yards of doeskin valued at \$165,000. Doeskin is a leather made from the skin of a doe, used especially for gloves, or a densely napped finish for certain woolen fabrics, such as flannel. Kenyon is making doeskin jeans at the time at both mills. Simple calculations indicate that the height of the "fall" used to power the wheels is fourteen to fifteen feet at each mill.

In 1873, Solomon Barber, from Rhode Island, an associate of Kenyon, came to Coventry and purchased the property between the pond and Main Street and 103 acres on the north side of Main Street including the cranberry bog that was located there. He became the agent and operator of Kenyon's mills in Coventry. He sold his share of the factory in 1877 to Rensellaer W. Barber who then became the agent.



The Mill Area in 1868

Records from the Willimantic Chronicle 1877-1886 make these references to Kenyon:

Oct. 26, 1877- The Kenyon and Barber mills are as usual with them in a flourishing condition. This mill is almost filled with competent help who work well and every month receive their pay.

Nov. 5, 1878- Mr. E.A. Tracy, Mr. T. Hollingsworth and Mr. R.W. Barber superintended different manufacturing establishments,

Mar. 25, 1879- A house owned by C.H. Kenyon, and occupied by R.W. Barber, Supt. of C.H. Kenyon's factory and his brother in South Coventry, was burned on Sunday morning. The fire is supposed to have been the work of an incendiary. The flames were discovered by Mrs. Barber about 3 o'clock in the wood house adjoining the main building, and before help could be obtained, the fire was beyond control. The Barber brothers saved the greater part of their household goods, insured for \$2,000 which about covers the loss. (*Located at 925 Main Street*)

Dec. 10, 1879- South Coventry. Messrs. Kenyon & Barber have recently put a new Turbine wheel into their mill, and made many other needed repairs. The time occupied in making the necessary improvements was one week.

Feb. 18, 1880- C.H. Kenyon & Co. have advanced the pay of the operatives in their mill.

Mar. 17, 1880- South Coventry. C.H. Kenyon & Co., manufacturers of America and Deer Island doeskins, have a new ticket upon their goods which in itself is a beauty--a neat engraving typifies the march of civilization, and the progress and superiority of American industries, by an Indian chief holding a scalp of a white man upraised upon a war-hatchet, and an Indian maiden, and the figure representing America, stands in the foreground holding in her right hand a slender stalk of flax imperiously poised above the head of an infuriated buffalo. At the left is a thrifty stalk of maize originating in our country, and upon the back of the ticket beneath overhanging clusters of the fruit of the vineyard is the motto, "Encourage Home Industries." A new bookkeeper is at their office, -a son of Dr. Mathewson of Durham. Mr. Kenyon came down with a \$200.00 contribution for the new library last week.

Aug. 18, 1880- C.H. Kenyon & Co. have purchased a steam engine for the branch manufactory known as the "little mill."

Dec. 28, 1881- South Coventry. The woolen mills of Barber & Kenyon have stopped for an indefinite period, and as a consequence the schools in district 1, and 3, have a greater number of scholars than usual.

May 17, 1882- South Coventry. The new mill of Barber & Kenyon is nearly completed. It is to be connected to the old factory by covered passage ways.

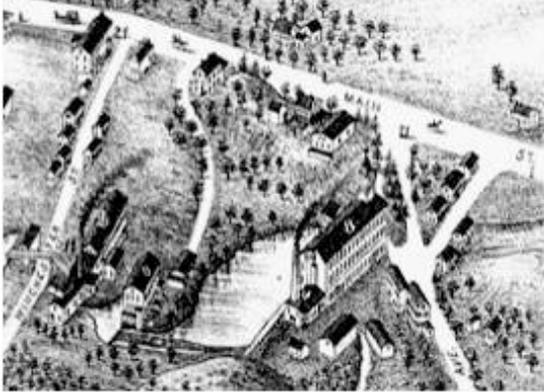
May 21, 1884- Manufacturing Notes. The Boston Journal of Commerce published the following manufacturing notes from Eastern Connecticut. C.H. Kenyon & Co., South Coventry, manufacturers of ladies' dress flannels, propose to enlarge their mill by building an addition to their finishing room 30x40 feet making their building 30x120 feet, three stories high instead of two, as now. They will also put in new machinery. (*This completes the three-story mill building that stands today adjacent to the dam. Its structure clearly indicates the two stages of construction, though the actual footprint is, in total, 36 by 94 feet with the addition at 47 x 47 feet.*)

Jul. 30, 1884- Quite a party went up from here to South Coventry last Saturday night to attend the dedication of Kenyon's new mill. There were about four hundred present and they had a merry time, with dancing and refreshments and sociality.

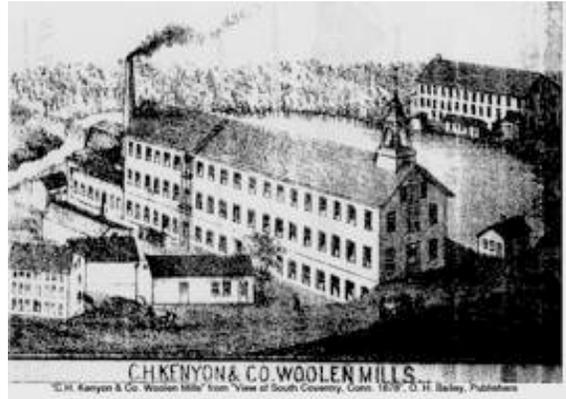
Dec. 10, 1884- South Coventry. The firm of Kenyon & Barber, manufacturers of ladies' fine dress flannels, probably warned by the frequent fires in this village, have recently furnished their mill with a patent sprinkler. In order to do this it was necessary to place a large tank on the high ground near Main Street, to serve as a reservoir for water supply. This tank has been covered by a neat building supplied with heating conveniences.

Nov. 10, 1886- C.H. Kenyon is improving the grounds near his tenements by grading on Main Street.

The 1880 Federal Census lists Kenyon & Company with \$40,000 of invested capital, making doeskin jeans valued at \$185,000, employing 96 hands, and using thirty horsepower from water and forty horsepower from steam.



A Sketch of the Mill Site in 1878

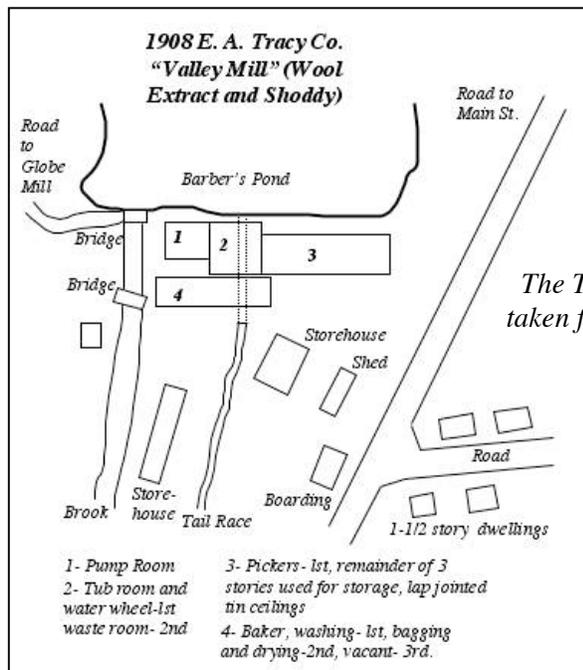


A Sketch of the Kenyon Mills in 1878

Charles H. Kenyon died in Norwich in 1891. He left his wife of thirty years Emeline, a son, Charles Henry Kenyon of Norwich, and a daughter, Carrie Slocum of Brookline Massachusetts. His will indicates his property in South Coventry included ten acres of land, the frame mill buildings, six tenement houses (a few of which still stand on the corner of Main Street and Armstrong Road), an office building, a superintendent's house (for Mr. R.W. Barber) and a long list of woolen making machinery including thirty seven looms and 3,200 spools. The small town of Kenyon in the southeastern section of Rhode Island was named after his family. Early in 1893, the Hartford Courant reported that the Kenyon factory had been leased for a term of years to the Washington Mill Company of Lawrence Massachusetts, manufacturers of cloakings. Soon after, Mr. Barber sold his share of the factory back to Kenyon's heirs and left Coventry for Dover, Maine where he became superintendent of the Brown Manufacturing Company.

The middle and late 1890's were difficult times for South Coventry. Newspaper and personal accounts indicate a severe lull in industrial activity, and at times, only a handful of people were employed in the mills. In January of 1902, Kenyon's heirs sold the factory and tenements to Eugene and Frank Tracy and Thomas Flaherty. Mr. Flaherty was a local businessman. The Tracy's (Eugene being age 52 at the time) came from Smithfield Rhode Island. Smithfield was the location of one of the first cotton mills built by the famous Samuel Slater in 1805. He named the place Slatersville, then a part of Smithfield. In the late 1800's, the Blackstone Woolen Company was making shoddy goods and the Tracy's may have been associated with this operation.

Eugene Tracy had been operating a shoddy mill (re-cycled wool) since 1882 at his shop upstream on the site now occupied by Ackert Electric. This purchase would more than double his capacity. He would expand the operation further by building a large additional building parallel to the first and another storage building slightly to the east, parallel to the brook. In 1918, the Tracy mills are assessed at a value of over \$40,000 which is about three quarters of a million dollars in today's valuation. This did not include the machinery. The mill had a fair amount of fire protection. A hydrant supplied with water from the lake by the South Coventry Water Company was located on the northwestern part of the lot. The main buildings had sprinklers and a night watchman. Heat was provided by steam, Power for the facility was by water and steam. The steam boilers were fed by coal shipped from the train depot, and lighting was electric.



The Tracy Mill site in 1908, then commonly called the "Valley Mill".

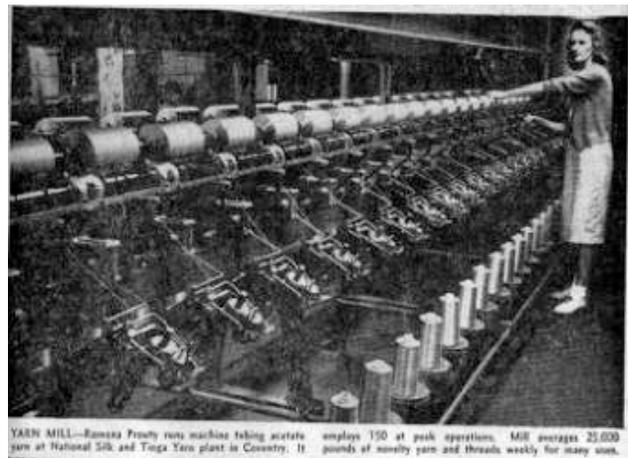
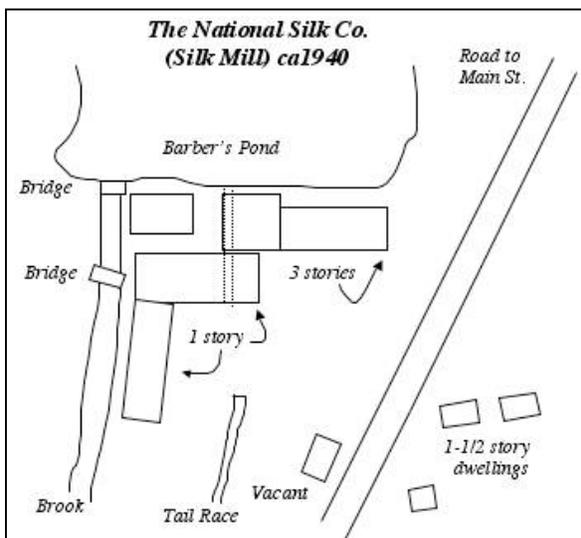
Mr. Tracy operated his shoddy mill here until 1929. He was joined by a partner, Mr. Dexter Elliott of Thompson in 1923 who contributed \$50,000 in a mortgage loan. The company engaged in another mortgage in 1922, and by 1927 this mortgage is past due. The company declined rapidly until the onset of the Great Depression of 1929, and then collapsed completely. The town had unpaid tax liens in 1924-1927 of just under \$2,000. Mr. Tracy abandoned the factory and retired to North Carolina where he lived until his death in 1934. The town quickly took over the property for back taxes in 1929. The factory stood vacant until 1935 when it was purchased by the National Silk Company.

The National Silk Company was formed in May of 1927. The company purchased the old Morgan Silk Mill on Mason Street, and started operations there. The company incorporated in 1928 with 1,000 shares of stock valued at \$100 each. It is remarkable that this company formed just two years before the stock crash of 1929 and managed to survive and grow during the Depression. Mr. Schweyer, president and treasurer of the National Silk Company, Incorporated, developed it to be the largest tax-paying corporation and the largest employer in Coventry. His home on South Street, the parsonage home of Dr. Joseph Huntington tutor to Coventry patriot Nathan Hale, was carefully restored and is one of the landmarks of the town. He became involved in many community activities including the Masonic Lodge, the Boy Scouts, the American Red Cross, and the Coventry Salvation Army. He purchased the old Methodist Episcopal Church in the Village and helped secure the Nathan Hale Community Center there in 1944 and was a member of the South Coventry Fire Department. He purchased and stored in the Mason Street building the material for a 100 bed emergency hospital including cots and supplies. The stock was still there in the 1960's.

By 1939 National Silk is making the famous Tioga Yarn. The original mill building adjacent to the dam is still in use. The smaller buildings are torn down and the wooden structures adjacent to the brook are replaced with a one and a two story cinder block building which remain today. The company has an extensive operation that purchases all sorts of thread, then dyes and winds it into a huge variety of yarn.



An extensive mail order business to women knitters across the country was developed and advertised widely in newspapers and magazines. The Mason Street site is used mostly for the mail order and retail business and storage, while the Kenyon Mill site was used for production (twisting various single material yarn into blends for making different articles of clothing). In 1953 the average weekly wage of an employee is \$49.60. Records from the '50's and '60's indicate a wide array of yarns were sold including a Knitting worsted yarn 4-ply, 100% wool, 70 cents/skein- 140 yards and a Tioga 5-ply sports yarn, 100% wool, 50 cents/skein- 110 yards. The company operated two shifts using commercial electricity on the first shift, and during the second shift, opened the race gate and use their water turbine to supply electricity. Its likely they only ran the turbine for one shift because the water flow in the brook and the capacity of the pond would only allow five to seven hours of flow before being exhausted. Their Country Store located on Mason Street offered discounts from five to thirty-three percent depending upon the amount of the order. Sales tax in 1956 was three percent. They would send out sample yarn kits by mail that included, as an example, tufts of yarn of 100% wool and various mixtures and colors of acetate, nylon, rayon, and Lurex. Their employees were nearly all women who were the best at the skills needed. Men handled the maintenance tasks. Their mail address was "The Coventry Yarn Mill" or "The Tioga Yarn Company", Coventry, Conn. No street address was needed. Tioga Yarn is a patented trademark.



Mr. Schweyer died in 1960 at age 71 and left his share of the company to his daughter Eloise Ryan, Her husband Harry Ryan became vice-president of the company until his death in 1964 at the age of 43, whereby Eloise took over the company. She is the second woman to own and operate a factory on the Mill Brook. The first was Sarah Bottum in the late 1890's who took over the silk mill on Mason Street, the very site that is occupied by part of the National Silk Company, from her late husband. National Silk continued their yarn business and consolidated their operation to this site in 1961 from the Mason Street site. The factory employed 150 people

at peak operations and averaged 25,000 pounds of novelty yarn and threads weekly. Their business starts declining in the early 1970's and in 1972 the mill is sold to Ray Roman.

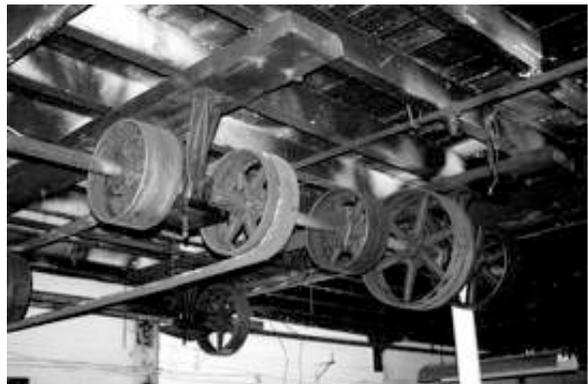
For a few years there is a complex of shops here called "Yankee Ingenuity" including The Wangumbaug Jewelers (gold & silver), The Pot Knot Shop (pottery), J&D Fantasy in Glass (hand blown glass), The Sun crafter (art & craft), The Vermont Shop, The Nimble Thimble (custom made clothes) The Tienda Two (Quoddy Moccasins), The Greenery (plants & terrariums), The Brush Stroke (paintings), The Leather Den (hand crafted leather goods), The Lambs Wool (hand knitting), and Veraguth's Stained Glass. By 1976 these shops are in decline and eventually close.

Over the next thirty years, the property is owned by a succession of entities who suffered bankruptcy and foreclosure. There is no productive use of the site save a few years in the late 1980's when the building adjacent to the brook was rented by a utility trailer maker. About this time, a DEP investigation found two drum storage areas with sixty drums filled with hazardous materials. The drums were removed along with contaminated soil. A 1996 inspection found traces of volatile organic compounds in the soil though there was no risk to nearby population. Since then the town has obtained grant money to clean and remove these compounds and to repair and stabilize the old wooden mill building adjacent to the dam. An old electric elevator hoist has been recovered. It was made by the Morse, Williams & Co. of Philadelphia in 1904 from patents dated 1882 to 1887.

In 1990 the town received a grant to hire consultants to prepare a "Plan of Preservation and Development" for the entire Village and in 1999 the town prepared a mill incubator feasibility study for this site. Late in 2005, the town released a Request for Proposal for adaptive reuse of the property and received two replies. Just recently the town council selected a developer whose plans for the site include townhouse style condominiums.



The old mill building in 2006



Old belts and pulleys on the second floor today

References:

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1904, 1914, 1924, and 1934 Sanborn Fire Insurance maps
The Willimantic Journal, 1863
The Willimantic Chronicle, 1877-1886, 1950, 1964
The Hartford Courant, 1890's
The Norwich Bulletin, 1891
Coventry Land Use Office