

A SPECIAL CORNER OF WESTON

by Jeanne Howes

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Also, it should be noted, there have been exciting moments here when legislative efforts at times, sought to tear off this part altogether from its proper Weston roots. These attempts failed. But the ambivalent struggle adds more color to our story of the corner of Weston that almost got away.

BEGINNINGS

In the earliest days, life in this section, then called "Osborn Town" must have been similar to that of the rest of Weston. In the Osborn graveyard still standing on Old Farm Road, the oldest stones are crumbling, but one which is still barely visible reads as follows: "In memory of Mary, wife of William Osborn, died Jan 6 1790 in 82 yr of her Age". Next to it, a broken stone marks the grave of William Osborn who died in February 1795.

Also, in that time and place, a general store operated by Burr Gilbert and Isaac Bennett sold provisions for the farmers. Sales of knives, molasses, lumber, rum and salt, saddles and oxen were duly recorded in pounds, shillings and pence. The store is long forgotten, but those family names have left a permanent mark here.

Another reminder of that period was found in the attic of the old Betts house where Mary Fox resided, now occupied by the Scott Parry Family. It's an antique clay bottle glazed in brown and stamped with the name ORRIN H. OSBORN. Once a container of milk or cider, today a mute witness to the life that was here.

The Betts house, the Osborn houses and cemetery are clearly shown in the top square of the Weston map of 1867. This area was still sparsely settled, but within the next fifty years there came such an influx of Swedish settlers that Osborn Town came to be known as "Swede Town." These Swedish people were the only

immigrants to settle as a group in our town - another distinctive feature of our Weston history.

JELLIFF'S WIRE MILL

Several small industries had ready sprung up in other parts of town, and in this corner, as the old 1867 map shows, Aaron Jelliff had established a wire factory. This fact is important to Our Story, as it was the wire industry which attracted the



Anders and Augusta Gustafson, grandparents of Gertrude Walker, former town clerk. A circa 1915 framed photo given to the Society by Jeanne Howes.

Swedes, many of whom were skilled machinists to come here to find work in America.

Jelliff's wire mill produced riddles and sieves. Riddles (not the guessing kind) were large coarse sieves or ash-sifters for saving reusable coal when shafting out the ashes. Products also included coal screens against which shovelfuls of hard coal were thrown to get rid of the coal dust.

From notes preserved by the late Rudolph Jacobson, a long time resident of our area, the quaint and primitive method of operation at the Jelliff Mill is described:

"The motive power used in this shop was a one man power tread mill. The treadmill was on the outside of the shop, south side. It was about twelve feet in diameter and six feet wide. It was built with treads to step on. The weight of the person inside the wheel stepping on the treads turned it and furnished the power to run a saw and several small machines."

"The wheel was operated by Abraham Dreamer, a veteran of the Mexican war. It was a great treat to the boys of fifty or more years ago to see Uncle Abe walking in the wheel, never reaching the top." (From The Wilton Bulletin, August 24-25, 1983.)

Not surprisingly, considering that peculiar treadmill, Jelliff's wire mill went out of business. But an earlier established wire mill, where Aaron Jelliff had learned his trade, now flourished and continued to expand. This was the Gilbert and Bennett wire factory just over the line in Redding, which ceased operations in June, 1989.

As the Gilbert and Bennett manufacturing company evolved from a Weston enterprise, and played the dominant role in changing the development of Weston's "Georgetown" corner, a brief account of its origins and early growth is essential.

HORSEHAIR SIEVES

Benjamin Gilbert who was born in Weston in 1789 tried a number of jobs working with a shoemaker, also in a tannery currying the hides to make them supple. One day in 1818 as he looked at a pile of discarded horsehair, he had a bright idea. This wasted material could be woven into a fabric and made into sieves. His wife thought that was a capital idea. She wove some strands on her handloom and Gilbert tacked the fabric to a hoop shaved from a sawed strip of wood. Now they had a marketable product. *Gilbert's sieve business*