



Reconnecting Northfield

Mill Brook Mill Site History and Development

Walking tour presented by Annie Chappell
Sunday, May 7th, 2023

Information from:

A Puritan Outpost, Herbert C. Parsons, 1937

All About Northfield, A.P. Fitt, 1910

A History of the Town of Northfield, Massachusetts for 150 Years,
Howard and Sheldon, 1875

NOTES/tour stops

There may have been as many as seven mill sites on the Mill brook.

Areas of stone structures that would have been dam constructions are visible along the brook, although they are largely obscured by decades or centuries of vegetative growth and collapse. I could not find notes about many of the sites' exact locations, only as referenced in the Howard and Sheldon text about mills being sited adjacent to or in between other mills. There may be more specific information in the early records of land owners and locations.

Grist mills have two stones. The one on the bottom is fixed, and the top stone turns to grind the grain. There are lots of good images if you search the internet, and it helps you imagine our Mill Brook industry to see how the mills were constructed and sited.

Grist mill stones at PO and Goodwins –

The mill stone at the Post Office is most likely from the original site close to Main Street, but I did not find specific information about that. The stone that is in front of 18 Glen Road was hauled from further down the brook some years ago by Tim Goodwin. Apparently, there were a few other mill stones that Mr. Chamberlin (who built the impressive stone wall) pulled from the brook and may have sold or given away.

Evidence of earliest grist mill/rocky area

This is the site noted (engraved) on the mill stone at the Post Office. As you walk down the brook you see a depression or canal next to the small hillock. On the other side of that is a rocky face that appears to have been the dam site. The water would have been directed through the depression next to the road serving as the mill race, and an overshot (but it seems more reasonable that it was undershot) mill wheel would have turned to power the grist mill.

The second mill site, as noted in Howard and Sheldon, was just below the grist mill, and there is evidence of a stone wall that may have provided dam structure, just above the concrete dam.

A third site is likely to be below the current dam, at the end of the stone wall, where there is a narrows, just above the water cascade.

Ruin site – what type of mill?

The stone structure near the foot of the falls on the north side of the brook is a lovely ruin, and would have housed the mill building, with a sluiceway or structure to funnel water past a mill wheel to power the mill.

Lumber mill site

The mill site below the ruin was a lumber mill that existed into the 1900s. Water was dammed where the stone face was most vertical. The lumber was milled there. On the road above was the building where the lumber was stored and sold. That is now a private home (it is the brown house on Glen Road).

The following is information from Howard & Sheldon:

The Mill Brook was originally call Cowas and Coassok, which was a Sokoki name meaning PINE. From Sheldon: The indian word *kowa* means a pine, plural, *koash*: ohke or *ock* signifies place, so *koash-ock* would mean “pine trees place”. The area had large growth hemlock and pines.

The brook was a dividing line between Massamet on the south side, and Nawalet on the north side. Squakheag was the name of the village. Rich Holshuh mentioned that the name is about the people who had been divided and then gathered here. It is much more about the use of the site than an actual permanent village name.

First Settlement, 1673

King Phillip’s war 1675.

The initial Northfield settlement was destroyed when King Phillip’s band of warriors burned fields, killed farm animals, and made settlement impossible.

Second Settlement period

A committee of notable men and soldiers, including Ensign John Lyman, Sergeant John King, and William Holton made up a governing or determining body that would establish the layout of the new town, with a list of grantees to own parcels.

Their plan was laid out to include 40 families to settle on the tract, and that each parcel would be 20 rods wide. A rod is 16.5’ in length.

Owners had to be on that land by May 10th, 1686, or forfeit their right. They established that there would be a main street 10 rods in width. They measured the length of the main street a rod and rope, so that it would be straight, and have equally sized parcels to the west, bounded by the river, and the east, bounded by the upland.

Initially, only a few settlers were willing to re-establish home sites with the prospect of further raids by native peoples, but by 1685, several men and their families committed to the new settlement.

Site 1 1685 - First grist mill, built by **John Clary** on his “privelege” of 20 acres.

The John Clary lot. This historic spot was the site of the Sokoki Indian village, called Squakeag, and the site of the second fort erected by the white settlers. **John Clary Jr.** built a grist-mill on the privilege next the street, in **1685**. The dam was just above the one now standing.

1686 - The second fort was built next to this site.

1688 - **John Clary** and his 15-year-old daughter were killed by Native inhabitants.

In **April 1714**, this double lot was set in the tax list to John’s son, **Joseph Clary**.

In **1716**, the mill privilege was purchased by **Stephen Belding**, who rebuilt the grist-mill, which was held by him and sons till **1779**, when it was sold to **Aaron Whitney**.

June 30, 1717, **Samuel Kingsley** of Northampton and **Joseph Clary** of Swampfield sell the lot, with the mill privileges adjacent, to **Stephen Belding** of Swampfield.

In **1717**, **Jonathan Belding**, a brother of **Stephen**, built a saw-mill below, of which Stephen was one-half owner. **April 10, 1728**, sold his portion of the mill to his brother, Jonathan; “one half of a saw-mill on the falls of said brook, and all that pertains, including the privilege of the stream there, so that it was not “prejudicial” to the grist mill above. It was understood that the sale included only that side of the brook where the mill stood. The mill was operated by **Jonathan Belding Sr.** and **Jr.** during their lives, “as long as the old man was able to hoist the gate”. **September 9, 1812**, **Belding** sold the site to **Ezekiel Webster** for \$200.

July 23, 1748, **Aaron Belding (son?)** was scalped – there is a plaque about this event on stone wall at Trinitarian church, along Main Street.

In **1775**, **Stephen Belding** set up a clothier's shop, with carding and fulling machinery, between the grist and saw-mills, which was sold with the other privileges to **Aaron Whitney**, and eventually became the property of **Simeon Boyden**.

Jan. 26, 1779, this property was sold by **Stephen Belding** (Junior) to **Aaron Whitney**, who made large improvements, and carried on an extensive business in lumber and merchandise for several years.

About **1782**, a grist-mill was put in below the saw-mill by **Aaron Whitney**. This was rebuilt by **John Barrett, Esq.** who then sold it **August 9, 1802**, to **Ezekiel Webster** for \$500. **Webster** either added to or converted the mill and put in a forge, with trip-hammer, etc.

Sept. 11, 1789, Whitney sells to **Benj. Green** of Boston, who sold to **John Barrett Esq.**

By **1771**, Northfield was a going concern. There were 65 dwellings; Alexander Norton had a tan house. There were several working mills, **Aaron Whitney** had a store, and **Simeon Alexander** owned a blacksmith shop. **Elias Bascom** ran a clothier's shop, and also owned one of the two saw mills. The other was then owned jointly by **Jonathan and Stephen Belding**. The two grist mills were owned by **Stephen Belding** and **Ebenezer Janes**.

On **Sept. 11, 1789**, **Whitney** sold the store to **Benjamin Green** of Boston, who then sold to **David Barber May 14, 1792**. The old store was continued in operation for many years by Mr. Barber. The property was sold by the Barber heirs to **J. C. Brigham**.

In **1804 Boyden** sold the clothing mill to **Josiah Fisher**, and he moved to Orange where he built the first carding mill. Fisher sold to Captain James White **June 15th, 1814**. Between **1790** and **1830** the population grew by 102%, the largest growth rate of any town in the county besides Heath. The largest pop. increase was between **1810-1820** when the town grew by about 36 people a year. By **1830** the population was 1,757.

“In addition to the families whose names have been familiar in these annals from the earliest times, others, such as Dutton, Barber, Houghton, Moody, Ezekiel Webster, Caleb Lyman, Obadiah Dickinson, Barnabas Billings, and Benjamin Callender had become inhabitants [**by 1800**], and added to the moral power as well as the wealth of the place. Some stirring men had died or removed from town, such as **Aaron Whitney** the miller and trader, **Elias Bascom** who had a fulling-mill and saw-mill, Nathan Fisk the tailor, and ----- Miner who had a pottery for the manufacture of brown earthen ware on the river bank at the upper end of Pauchaug”.

There were lots of notable inhabitants, but **Aaron Whitney** had character and a reputation worth highlighting:

Aaron Whitney was born in **1714**. In 1737, he was ordained minister to the "Plantation at Nichcwang," now Petersham. Whitney was a strong tory, while the town of Petersham

was ardently whig, and at the opening of the revolution, the Town voted that they would "not bargain with him, nor employ, the Rev. Mr. Whitney, to preach for them any longer.... Whitney, however, persisted in preaching, and when kept from entering the pulpit, by an armed guard, he preached at his own house to such as would come until his death in 1779."

Whitney moved to Northfield in **1773**, when he bought a house from Ebenezer Harvey, who was a carpenter. The lot was initially owned by Thomas Webster. "Mr. **Aaron Whitney** was the leading merchant in town, and the town's stock of ammunition was kept at his store. Early in July some suspicion arose (which proved to be without foundation) that he was tainted with toryism; and on the 9th, a warrant was issued for a town meeting the next day; at which it was voted "to remove the town's stock of ammunition from Mr. Whitney's store to some other place. He however regained the confidence of his fellow citizens, and was often honored by election to important offices." Whitney served as a Selectman in 1773, 80, and 86.

Other mill sites

Upstream, **Gurdon Strobridge** built grist and saw mill, then sold to **George Bacon**. Above that was pail factory, and later a saw-mill, owned by **Murdock** and **Johnson**. Above that, **Hezekiah Mattoon** built a saw mill, which became a batting factory.