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Manufacturing in Bridgewater, 1900-1910

Benjamin A. Spence

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Bridgewater, Massachusetts
A Town in Transition

Manufacturing in Bridgewater
1900-1910
(Including Extensive Historical Background)

Benjamin A. Spence
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An Explanation

For several years I have had the pleasure of delving into the history of Bridgewater, Massachusetts, concentrating on the first quarter of the twentieth century and providing, when appropriate, historical background to make my discussions clearer. Although my research and writing are ongoing, I have decided to make available drafts of a number of topics which I have explored at length, with the hope that the material presented will prove helpful to many readers. I would request that credit be given if my findings are used by other writers or those making oral presentations.

As my study has proceeded, many people have been helpful and, hopefully, I will be able to thank all of them during the course of my writing. At this point, let me mention just a few who have been especially supportive. Many thanks to the Trustees of Bridgewater’s Public Library for allowing me free access to the sources in the town’s library, made easier by the aid given to me by the research librarians under the competent direction of Mary O’Connell. Without the constant aid of Dr. Steven G. Young, I would have been at a loss many times in how to proceed in the use of the computer. Many thanks to Sylvia B. Larson who has been willing to spend numerous hours using her fine editing skills and her probing historical mind to improve greatly these drafts, all the while sharing my interest in the history of Bridgewater. Any errors in these pieces, of course, are solely mine. What a great joy it is to share many of my findings with S. Mabell Bates, who, as a friend, head of the special collection at Bridgewater State College Library, and member of the Bridgewater Historical Commission, has provided me with valuable historical material and has been a constant source of inspiration. Lastly, my research, particularly concerning the Bridgewater Normal School, would have been far less interesting without my many conversations with David K. Wilson, long associated with public relations and institutional research at Bridgewater State College. I appreciate his willingness to share his historical knowledge of the college, videotape my tours of Bridgewater’s School Street and Central Square, begin the time-consuming task of placing some of my writings on a web-site, and advise me on putting essays, such as this one on manufacturing, into more permanent forms.

One final note concerning bibliography: At some juncture, I will present an essay on the sources used in my study. For now, the numerous footnotes will give the reader a good idea of the research materials used in this historical account of the Town of Bridgewater.
Manufacturing in Bridgewater, Massachusetts
1900
(With Extensive Historical Background)

It is not surprising that the corporate seal of the Town of Bridgewater, which was designed in 1896, pays homage to, among other things, the “establishment of the various branches of the mechanical industry….“ By the late nineteenth century, the town had become highly industrialized, despite a lingering and not-without-merit reputation as a good farming community. The rise of several industries in the century after the American Revolution is a fascinating and, at times, complicated story, one that merits a scholarly monograph. By the middle of the 1800’s, for instance, Bridgewater, once the South Parish of the much larger Old Bridgewater, was widely referred to as an “Iron Town.” Some salient points of the emergence of the town’s manufacturing endeavors are worth relating here, however, since they shed light on how industry came to dominate Bridgewater’s economy by the start of the twentieth century.¹

Agriculture, to be sure, was the economic foundation of the South Parish from its establishment in 1716 until the 1820’s, when it became one of four separate political entities carved out of the original town, which itself had been incorporated in 1656. There were, nonetheless, some early portends that the South Parish was not to remain simply a quiet farming community. Bog or swamp ore, especially in the area of Lake Nippenicket, almost limitless amounts of rich clay along the banks of rivers, forests of oak and pine trees, and potential for water power afforded by rivers and streams did not go unnoticed by the early settlers of the South Parish, even as they cleared the land for agricultural purposes. In fact, in the early 1690’s, when Bridgewater, along with rest of Plymouth Colony was being absorbed by Massachusetts Bay Province, a dam for “mill purposes” had been built across the Town River, creating a reservoir of three to four hundred acres near Prudence Lane, later that part of High Street not far from

¹Joshua E. Crane (For the Committee), “The Town Seal,” Annual Report of the Town of Bridgewater, 1896, pp. 85-87; this particular annual report was printed in 1897 by Henry T. Pratt, Bridgewater’s well-known printer; after his death in 1898, the reports were printed by Arthur H. Willis, who had learned the trade in Pratt’s office; subsequent references to this source will be cited as the Annual Town Report and include the particular year; copies of the annual reports, dating back to 1847, can be found in the Bridgewater Public Library; “Origin of the Town Seal,” Tales Around the Common, ed. by Dorothy Lord Mann, Arthur C. Lord, and J. Kenneth Moore (Bridgewater: Dorr’s Print Shop, 1988), p. 1; it is appropriate to mention that this latter source is one of four publications associated with The Bridgewater Historical Collectors, a group that included Ruth Hooper Bishop, James “Mike” Bois, James W. Buckley, Martha Dorr Cossaboom, Katherine Pratt Jordan, Arthur C. Lord, Dorothy Lord Mann, and James K.
Main Street in present-day Bridgewater. Along with other communities in Plymouth Colony, however, there was some concern in Bridgewater that dams like this one might interfere with the passage of herring, or alewife, in the spring, depriving farmers of much-needed fertilizer. In any case, a saw mill and an iron forge soon followed on this site. In addition, by the 1750’s many farmers in the parish, with time on their hands during the long New England winter, had acquired mechanical skills which helped them in crafting their own farming implements, often using a combination of iron and wood. In some cases, farmers supplemented their incomes by selling such products to others.

Other than some evidence that bricks were made in the Titicut area as early as the beginning of the 1700’s, incipient iron works were the only significant industrial enterprises in the South Parish during the colonial period. In the four decades before 1750, small iron enterprises were created on sites at Titicut and Carver Pond, with the best iron masters producing quality farming implements and some fire-arms. This early activity in iron manufacturing, which also was carried on in the surrounding communities, such as Taunton, Kingston, and Middleboro, was soon subjected to greater scrutiny as Great Britain sought to apply the rules of mercantilism to her North American colonies. The role of colonies under this economic system was to supply raw materials to the mother country and not engage in the production of finished products, lest colonial industries compete successfully with those in Great Britain. Accordingly, an Act of 1750 prohibited further construction of slitting and rolling-mills and forges in the colonies. This move to protect the iron fabrication industry in the “mother” country most likely slowed

Moore; hereafter, any work by James K. Moore will be cited as written by K. Moore.

2 Bridgewater Independent, Feb. 25, 1910; this weekly newspaper, which dates back to 1876-1877, is the most important source for my research on Bridgewater from 1900 to 1925 and will subsequently be cited as BI; Joshua E. Crane, “History of Bridgewater,” Hurd’s History of Plymouth County (Philadelphia: The J. W. Lewis & Co., 1884), pp. 784-785; I often used a reprint of Crane’s history edited by James William Buckley and Katherine Pratt Jordan and printed in 1986 by Lion Print in Bridgewater for The Bridgewater Historical Collectors; subsequent references to this source, which is all-important for anyone having an interest in the history of Bridgewater from its origins to 1884, will be cited as Crane and include the appropriate page(s); “E. L. Cook, Brick Manufacturer,” The Bridgewater Book-Illustrated (Taunton, Massachusetts: William S. Sullwold Publishing, Inc., 1985), no pagination; published by the Old Bridgewater Historical Society in 1985, this work includes material from two original works published in 1899 and 1908 and some additional information and pictures that take us to around 1916; subsequent references to this source in most cases will simply be cited as the Bridgewater Book; usually excluding page numbers since it contains no consistent pagination; George D. Langdon, Jr., Pilgrim Colony: A History of New Plymouth, 1620-1691 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 149; History Highlights: Bridgewater, Massachusetts: A Commemorative Journal, ed. by Katherine M. Doherty (Taunton, Massachusetts: Published For The Bicentennial Commission By William S. Sullwold, Publishing, 1976), p. 37; this source will be hereafter cited as HH; Wm. Lord McKinney, Old Bridgewater Tercentenary, 1656-1956 (section on Bridgewater), no pagination; Orra L. Stone, History of Massachusetts Industries-Their Inception, Growth, and Success (Boston-Chicago: The S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1930), Vol. II, pp.1187-1188; K. Moore, “The Iron Works at Stanley,” Newsletter of the Old Bridgewater Historical Society, Vol. II, Number 11, March 1988; David R. Moore, Images of America: Bridgewater (Charleston, S. C.: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), p. 3; hereafter, any work by David R. Moore will be cited as written by
the manufacturing of the iron products in Bridgewater, but did not prevent Hugh Orr’s foundry on the Matfield River in the East Parish of Bridgewater from producing cannons for the American cause in the Revolution. With national independence secured, the manufacturing of refined iron and its related products in the South Parish was resumed with increased vigor. By this time, bog iron from local deposits was increasingly being replaced by iron ore imported from New York, New Jersey, and Great Britain.3

From the 1780’s until around 1820, the revitalization of the iron industry in the South Parish determined that the “town” would not remain a quiet agricultural community, but rather was destined to become a flourishing, if small, industrial center. Led by Isaac and Nathan Lazell and Robert Perkins, the iron works at the High Street-Town River site was established and thrived, producing over four hundred tons of iron by the 1790’s. Soon after the War of 1812, Eleazer Carver started a cotton gin factory on the outlet of Carver’s Pond. By 1818, Bridgewater could boast its share of forges, slitting mills, anchor shops, nail factories, and trip hammers, as well as many millwrights and mechanics. Although the population of the South Parish remained small, numbering about twelve hundred in 1810, it became more strategically located in 1805-06, when the Boston-New Bedford Turnpike connected the parish to these two thriving seaports. The iron industry also profited from important inventions such as the tack and nail machines of Ezekiel and Jesse Reed. In fact, Bridgewater led the way in the making of tacks and nails, an activity that remained part of the town’s industrial complex for years to come.4

In addition to the emergence of the iron industry, there were other economic activities in the

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D. Moore.

3 BI, June 15, 1906, Feb. 18, 1988; Nathan W. Littlefield, “Bridgewater-Past and Present,” BI, Feb. 25, 1910; Crane, pp. 784-785; Bridgewater Book, p. 21; History of the Old Colony Railroad (Boston, Mass: Hager and Handy Publishers, 1893), p. 372; Stone, History of Massachusetts Industries, Vol. II, pp. 1187-1188; Townscape Institute, Form 185, pp. 440-441, see also pp. 4 and 15 in the general introduction; a comprehensive survey of Bridgewater’s historic architecture, this latter work was initiated in 1983 when the Board of Selectmen “received a grant from the National Park Service, Department of the Interior, through the Massachusetts Historical Commission;” the Townscape Institute was contacted to do the survey which was done under the direction of Edward W. Gordon; this important “unpublished work,” copies of which can be found in the Bridgewater Public Library, will hereafter be cited as the Townscape Institute and include the form and page; Thomas P. Moran and The “Highlights” Staff, “Bridgewater in War,” HH, p. 130; Ralph S. Bates, “Bridgewater Background,” HH, p. 33; D. Moore, “Economy, Business, Industry, and Agriculture,” HH, p. 81; A. P. Usher, “Colonial Business and Transportation,” Commonwealth History of Massachusetts, ed. by Albert Bushnell Hart, Vol. II, p. 407.

4 Crane, pp. 784-785; Bridgewater Book, p. 21; Stone, History of Massachusetts Industries, Vol. II, pp. 1187-1188, 1190, 1192-1193; McKinney, Old Bridgewater Tercentenary, 1656-1956; HH, p. 141; the three extensive chronologies in this latter work, much consulted by this author, were compiled by Dr. Ralph S. Bates, a longtime Professor of History at Bridgewater State College; Townscape Institute, pp. 19, 23; K. Moore, “Iron Works at Stanley;” “Lazell, Isaac, (Major), 1756-?---Merchant,” HH, p. 269.
early nineteenth century, which indicated that simple subsistence farming no longer dominated the South Parish’s economy. During the 1790’s, at the juncture of the Town-Taunton River and the road to Plymouth, in an outlying eastern section of the parish called Prattown, a dam, grist mill, fulling mill, and cottages for workers along the eastern side of Mill Street were built, presaging manufacturing endeavors that would continue for over a century. Around the same time, three separate shipyards along the Taunton River were producing ships up to 250 tons, using white oak, noted for its strength and durability. These vessels were for use in the coastal trade. There was even talk of a canal connecting Cape Cod Bay with the Taunton River. The Embargo of 1807, one of the events leading to the War of 1812, ended any hopes that Bridgewater had a future as a shipbuilding center, however. Shoemaking, one industry that would take hold in the town, was not yet mechanized, but cobblerers were producing shoes by hand, some of which were sold at the two general stores of the South Parish. Straw braid and bonnet manufacturing, another home industry, started in the Federal period but, unlike the shoe industry, was not destined to expand in the nineteenth century and began to decline in the 1830’s.5

In a microcosmic way some of the changes in the Bridgewater economy between the 1820’s and the 1870’s reflected some broad state and national developments. In 1830, the town’s population (the South Parish was now Bridgewater as we know it today) was 1,855; by 1875, following the national trend, it increased to 3,969. After the War of 1812, in line with a good part of Massachusetts, more and more of the town’s wealth began to be found in industry than in farming. The great migration westward (some, in the 1840’s, labeled it “Manifest Destiny”) opened up vast stretches of agriculture land, making it difficult, if not impossible, for farmers in places like Bridgewater to compete in certain types of commercial farming. Even the growth of the Cotton Kingdom in the South between 1820 and 1860 had an impact on the town. On the one hand, there were many who opposed slavery, and it is reported that Bridgewater had its branch of the “Underground Railroad” to aid the fleeing Southern slaves. Yet ironically, the building of cotton gins in the town, some of which were sold in the Southern states, certainly, if unintentionally, helped intensify slavery and made “Cotton King.” The rapid spread of the railroad system between the northeastern and the “old” northwestern sections of the nation opened up new markets

5 BI, April 15, 1910; Crane, p. 785; Bridgewater Book; Townscape Institute, p. 20; Stone, History of Massachusetts Industries, Vol. II, pp. 1190, 1197; McKinney, Old Bridgewater Tercentenary, 1656-1956; D. Moore, “Economy…,” HH, pp. 81, 84, 87; HH, p. 140; Roland M. Keith, “Once Built Ships in Bridgewater,” files in the Bridgewater Public
for Bridgewater manufactured goods after 1846 when the railroad connected the town with Boston to the north and Fall River to the south. The great emigration to United States in the middle of the nineteenth century also had an impact on Bridgewater. Some of the Irish who moved to this town worked in the expanding iron industry or engaged in agricultural work. In sum, although Bridgewater was a small community, its economy was increasingly part of a national one.\(^6\)

The iron industry spearheaded Bridgewater’s economic growth in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Between 1816 and 1825, Lazell, Perkins, & Co., which had been preceded by Lazell, Carey & Co, expanded the iron works at its High Street-Town River site. Generally, the Lazell-Perkins name was used until the 1870’s, though the company was incorporated as the Bridgewater Iron Manufacturing Company on June 18, 1825. Whatever the nomenclature, this business was Bridgewater’s most successful and largest in the middle years of the nineteenth century. As early as 1830, it was manufacturing steam engines, “making large additions” to its “machine shop.” Despite the national economic panics of 1837, 1857, 1873 and difficulties with transportation, the company prospered, thanks in good measure to the able leadership of Nahum Stetson. Receiving his education in an East Bridgewater public school and the Bridgewater Academy, he became the firm’s chief financial officer in 1835, following the death of Nathan Lazell, Jr., who had been the first agent and manager of the company. With the coming of the railroad to Bridgewater, in 1846, the enterprise commenced its most productive years, and Bridgewater was called the “Bethlehem” of the east. In 1856, James Ferguson, a Scottish immigrant, started working at the iron works and served as its superintendent for twenty-eight years. The company emerged as a very diversified operation, known for its heavy castings and forgings. In its heyday, the firm occupied over seventy-five acres and employed hundreds of men. In the town’s annals, this firm might be best known for providing the iron plating for the Monitor, the iron gunboat designed by John Ericsson in the Civil War to aid the Union in defeating the Confederacy. But Bridgewater citizens of the 1860’s most likely continued to remember more vividly the terrible explosion at the Iron Works in June of 1862 which resulted in the death of eight persons and injuries to twenty others, a terrible tragedy for a town of less than four thousand. For a number of years after the war, the Bridgewater Iron Company, as it was called beginning in 1870’s, continued to prosper, paying over two thousand dollars in

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town taxes in 1876, by far the largest assessment on any business or individual. Also indicative of the company’s prominence was the great attention paid to its large technical exhibit at the Philadelphia Exposition, held to celebrate the nation’s one-hundredth birthday. Owing to the success of this business, Bridgewater was truly an “Iron Town” in the middle decades of the nineteenth century.  

The invention of a type of cotton gin in 1793 by Eli Whitney, making it easier to remove seeds from cotton and, in turn, promoting cotton cultivation and slavery, had an impact on Bridgewater’s industrial development in the nineteenth century. Eleazer Carver, a lineal descendant of one of the first settlers of the Plymouth Colony, was born in Bridgewater in 1785, as the town’s iron industry was reviving. As a young man, he traveled extensively in the South, working as an itinerant gin builder in Mississippi. After learning about the cotton business and having the opportunity to examine Whitney’s cotton gin in Washington before the British devastated the nation’s capital during the War of 1812--later labeled the Second War of Independence--Carver returned to his native town and created Carver, Washburn and Company with the help of Artemas Hale and Nathaniel Washburn. This firm had built cotton gins in a mill near Carver Pond off of Summer Street for about thirty years before E. C. Carver and Co. seceded from it and moved the business in the 1840’s to Satucket, a part of East Bridgewater. Driven by steam rather than horse power and able to clean the cotton as well as take it from the seed, the Carver gin, it is said, was the one most extensively used in the South during the 1850’s. The Carver mill in Bridgewater was destroyed by fire in 1854 and was not rebuilt. As a reminder of the company’s presence in Bridgewater, the simple clapboard structure erected about 1830 on the south side of Summer Street,

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close to the northeastern part of Central Square, to take care of the company’s business, still stands, undoubtedly minus much of the original building materials. It is, most likely, the oldest office building in Bridgewater. Its neighbors, the Bridgewater Inn to the southwest and two Federal houses to the east, shared a different fate and no longer serve as reminders of the town’s nineteenth century heritage. Carver died in 1866, a year after the thirteenth amendment to the United States Constitution officially ended slavery.\(^8\)

By the early 1830’s, the cotton gin industry in Bridgewater employed about thirty men and produced gins worth over twenty-two thousand dollars. The Carver-Washburn company no longer monopolized this manufacturing endeavor, however. In 1833, Bates, Hyde & Co. started producing the so-called Eagle Gins in the wheelwright shop of Ephraim Holmes Sprague on a Bedford Street site between Cedar Street and where the new New Jerusalem Church would be erected in 1871. Joseph Hyde was the driving force behind this company and had the foresight to move the operations of the business to its Pearl Street location in 1848 to take advantage of the town’s newly-established railroad connections to Fall River and Boston. On March 1, 1850, the firm suffered a disastrous fire at its new location, but fortunately production was continued in the old Carver shop near Carver’s Pond until the Fall when repairs to the Pearl Street factory were completed. The firm prospered and in the 1850’s had a work force of forty and a capital investment of thirty thousand dollars. It was late in this decade that Samuel Pearly Gates, who first came to Bridgewater from Ashby, Massachusetts, to attend the Normal School, began a long career and eventually dominant role in the company. In the decade after the Civil War, the company continued to prosper as its facility was enlarged and its foreign exports increased. Change of names and consolidation activities would be part of the future of this manufacturing outfit, which would remain a part of Bridgewater’s industrial complex into the 1920’s.\(^9\)

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\(^9\) *BI*, Sept. 25, 1896, Feb. 4, 1910, Oct. 30, 1914, March 15, 1915; May 9, 1924; *Crane*, p. 785; *Townscape Institute*, pp. 25, 33; *Tales Around the Common*, pp. 2, 4, 26; D. Moore, “Economy…,” *HH*, p. 83; “Gates, Samuel Pearly, 1837 to 1914—Manufacturer,” *HH*, p. 264; *HH*, pp. 142, 180; *Pictorial History*, 1987, p. 55; Bridgewater Historical Collectors, *Pictorial History: Bridgewater, Massachusetts* (Rockland, Massachusetts: Fairmount Printing, Inc., 1994), p. 5; D. Moore, *Images of America: Bridgewater*, pp. 12-13; Ephraim Holmes Sprague, who died in 1896, was involved in the formation of Bates, Hyde & Co. in 1833 and was identified with it for nearly forty years; I am aware that the Southern Cotton Gin Company operated on Spring Street, perhaps between 1840 and 1880, but my sources tell me little about this outfit; the wooden building it occupied was enlarged over the years and was used by a number of manufacturing businesses, including the Shawmut Lead Works and the Bridgewater Shoe Corporation; the
In 1848, Henry Perkins, a descendant of a family long involved in Bridgewater’s enterprising endeavors, established an iron foundry in the rear of the Bates, Hyde & Co., the cotton gin company which had just moved from Bedford Street to its new location at the foot of Pearl Street. Born in Bridgewater in 1814, Perkins had learned the trade of molder at the Bridgewater Iron Company and worked in foundries in the West and South. The original purpose of his foundry was to supply castings for the cotton gin company, with which Perkins would have a long relationship, including serving as its president in the late nineteenth century. For the first fifteen years, the Perkins company remained in its original location, but broadened its operations to include piano plate castings, thus beginning an association with the Chickering & Sons piano company that would last until 1908. As the Civil War was drawing to a close, Perkins decided to move into a larger, rectangular facility “just across the railroad tracks on Broad Street.” Its “moulding room building and brass foundry” date from this time and, not surprisingly, many of the firm’s workers were veterans of the Civil War.10

Despite the paramount role of iron manufacturing in Bridgewater’s industrial expansion in the mid-nineteenth century, the production of paper, bricks, and shoes also aided in the town’s economic growth. Taking advantage of the water power site created in Prattown some thirty years earlier, Joseph Hooper established a paper mill in 1823, the first of its kind in Plymouth County. He carried on the business until 1830, when it was taken over by George Hooker and Silas Warren. Over the next three decades or so there were some changes in ownership and name, but the enterprise prospered, producing quality paper. In 1857, even though the nation was slipping into one of its periodic depressions, the mill was purchased by the Hollingsworth Company. “Under the agency” of Mark Hollingsworth Cornell, who was born in Boston in 1836, this firm carried on a large and successful paper business for almost forty years, using water and steam power and installing the most up-to-date machinery. During this time, he and his wife, the former Nellie Pease, of Martha’s Vineyard, made their home in Prattown and became “earnest receivers” of the teachings of the New Jerusalem Church.11

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11 BI, July 19, 1886, Nov. 1, 1901, April 5, 1910; Crane, p. 785; Bridgewater Book; Stone, History of Massachusetts Industries, Vol. II, pp. 1192, 1197; Townscape Institute, pp. 20, 32; McKinney, Old Bridgewater
As paper manufacturing was on the rise in Bridgewater, the town also witnessed the advent and
growth of the brick industry. Around 1830, Mitchell Hooper and Jeremiah Townsend, taking advantage
of large clay deposits along the Town River, began the manufacture of bricks on a site between this river
and Plymouth Street, a mile or so southwest of Prattown, where Hooper’s brother Joseph had started a
paper mill. From its small beginnings, the business by the middle of the century was manufacturing
about four million bricks a year. Machinery was installed in 1854, but some steps in the process, such as
the mixing of the clay, still had to be done by hand. In addition to his brick enterprise, Hooper was active
in the First Congregational (Parish) Church, which had adopted the Unitarian creed by the middle of the
nineteenth century, and he also represented Bridgewater in the Massachusetts House of Representatives in
1861. Around 1835, he purchased a house dating back to the middle of the previous century, located on
Plymouth Street, near present-day Waterford Village. His son George M. entered the business in 1859,
and like his father, was active in civic affairs of the town and state. His brick house, built around 1865
on Plymouth Street near that of his father’s, supposedly served as advertisement for their brick
manufacturing concern. At the end of the Civil War the company employed thirty-five men and was
making twenty thousand dollars’ worth of bricks a year.12

There was a steady increase in the production of shoes during the middle years of the nineteenth
century, but not until the late 1800’s did this industrial activity show signs of the status it would attain in
the early twentieth century. In his 1884 history, Crane says nothing about this economic endeavor, but
does cite three town retailers who sold of boots and shoes. As previously mentioned, shoes had been
made by local cobblers before the War of 1812 and, shortly thereafter, were being sold in Bridgewater’s
two general stores. While more machinery was being used by the middle of the century, Bridgewater’s
shoe business remained in good measure a cottage industry, providing seasonal employment rather than
year-round work. One town historian has written that in “1837 there were manufactured 1,124 pairs of
boots, 53,800 pairs of shoes, the value of which was $57,317. There were 150 males employed in this
work and 56 females.” About twenty years later, a statistical compilation put out at the time of

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12 BI, Oct. 16, 1886, Feb. 25, 1910; Crane, p. 790; “Hooper, George M., 1838 to 1909--Manufacturer,” HH, p. 266;
Townscape Institute, p. 26, Form 185, pp. 440-441, Form 186, pp. 442-443.
Bridgewater’s bicentennial celebration lists only 600 pairs of boots, but 166,000 pairs of shoes. The total value of the industry, according to this source, was $125,700, employing 55 males and 35 females. Perhaps the increasing use of machinery accounts for the decline in the employment figures in the 1850’s. In any case, in 1860 the Bridgewater Industrial Company began to manufacture shoes on Hale Street. With the outbreak of the American Civil War, the shoe industry in general became even more mechanized, owing to the great demand for army shoes and boots and the decline in available workers as men went off to fight in the war. In 1875, nevertheless, Bridgewater was not among the top twelve communities in Plymouth County, which included East and West Bridgewater, noted for their progress in the manufacturing of shoes. Perhaps this helps account for the Bridgewater’s drive in the following fifteen years to remedy this situation.13

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a surge of industrialization catapulted the United States into first place among the economic powers of the world. Bridgewater was only a minute part of this story, but its growth of population and manufacturing mirrored the national trend. Its population of almost four thousand in 1875 approached six thousand by the turn of the century. Manufacturing continued to expand, but not without changes in the overall industrial pattern. Some of the older companies continued to do well as did some of the newer ones that located near the railroad tracks in the area of Spring and Hale Streets. Joining the railroad as a catalyst for industrial expansion was the creation in 1887 of the privately owned and operated water works located on Sprague Hill, just east of the corner of High and Broad Streets, and the building of an electric light plant around the same time at the corner of Broad Street and what would later be named Crapo Street. Some of the national issues associated with the nation’s new industrial age, including the tariff and labor-capital relations, were bound to have an impact on Bridgewater. State regulations of working conditions also had to be considered, as the town came to grips with industrialization.14

The Bridgewater Iron Company continued to play an important, if diminishing, role in the town’s

economy in the last twenty-five years of the nineteenth century. As Bridgewater’s premiere manufacturing enterprise in 1875, it produced goods worth close to a million dollars and was most likely “the largest iron concern in New England.” Since local taxes were based on property holdings, the company, which owned seventy acres of land, was the town’s largest taxpayer, paying over two thousand dollars in 1876. The firm was also the biggest employer in Bridgewater, providing work for about three hundred men. But the venerable iron works had reached its apogee, with its fortunes taking a turn for the worst in the 1880’s, despite touting such achievements as the production in 1887 of a casting weighing over 20,000 pounds and the manufacture in the following year of a large pulley weighing 10,000 pounds for the Revere Copper Co. at Canton, Massachusetts. Undoubtedly, the basic cause for the decline of the town’s long established iron works was related to the rise of steel manufacturing in Pennsylvania, which had the advantage of having “right at the door of the mills” abundant sources of coal, iron ore, and manganese, raw materials needed for the production of steel, a stronger and more malleable commercial form of iron, containing a lower content of carbon than cast iron. There was some suggestion at the time that iron companies in New England, including the one in Bridgewater, should turn to the so-called Bessemer process to make steel, using bar iron from England and coal from Nova Scotia. But the Bridgewater Iron Company, at this juncture, was perhaps too set in its ways to convert to steel production. As a consequence, some of its departments closed or became less profitable. The one that refined iron for use in making nails was especially hard hit as nail manufacturers turn to steel. The future of tube work at the company was also problematic, owing to “the heavy suit” brought against it for alleged infringement of patent.15

A strike in June of 1886 further undermined the town’s iron works, long considered “financially infallible.” Averring that it could not meet the workers’ demand for a thirty percent increase in wages, the firm suspended operations. Worried that a strike by 325 workers would have a dire impact on the retailing establishments of a community of less than four thousand inhabitants, the Bridgewater Independent declared that the wage dispute should be solved by arbitration. Whatever the merits of both

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Bridgewaters Water Company and advent of the town’s electric system are discussed in other sections of my work; the “s” in Bridgewater was used because the company served both Bridgewater and East Bridgewater.

sides in the dispute, the strike ended in two months without violence, but also without gain for either party. Most workers received no increase in pay, despite talks between Isaac Damon and John M. Stetson, directors of the company, and J. H. Stillman, of the district board of the Knights of Labor, a national labor organization dating back to 1869, and “a committee of the Bridgewater assembly of that order.” The company continued to operate, but not at the level it had during its halcyon years, when it was the town’s premiere manufacturing enterprise. In 1887, the trustees removed the machinery in the forge department. Work remained brisk, nevertheless, in the plate mill, foundry and machine shop. There was some talk in the few years after the strike that the iron works was about to be sold. A special town meeting was called in March 1888 to discuss the possibility of exempting from taxation any firm purchasing the iron works, but it was ruled that such an action would be illegal. For many Bridgewater inhabitants, the tearing down of the company’s office, one of the town’s old landmarks, located on the corner of Main Street and Central Square, in late February of 1889, was the most visible sign that the firm’s dissolution was not far off.¹⁶

The change of ownership finally came in 1893 when the Stanley Tool Company of New Britain, Connecticut, bought out the Bridgewater Iron Company. There was not an immediate or clean break between this new firm and the old one, however. Until almost the end of the century, the town’s annual list of “heavy taxpayers” continued to cite this manufacturing concern under the legal name by which it was incorporated in 1825. Whatever nomenclature used, these lists clearly indicate that company, even with its lower tax bill, continued to be the largest contributor to the town’s coffers until 1900, when it ceded first place to the Brockton, Bridgewater & Taunton Street Railway Company. The list of employees was considerably shorter after the change of ownership, with the foremost ranking among Bridgewater’s employers by the late 1890’s belonging to McElwain’s shoe business. Some of the skilled iron workers of the Bridgewater Iron Company, including many with Irish backgrounds, stayed on with the company after the changes in 1893. They also continued to face the hazards of the workplace.

¹⁶ BI, May 15, June 19, July 17, 24, 31, Aug. 7, 14, Nov. 27, 1886, Nov. 5, 1887, Jan. 21, Feb. 11, March 10, 17, April 21, 1888, March 2, April 27, 1889; Census of Massachusetts, 1905, Vol. I, p. 819; D. Moore, “Economy...,” HH, pp. 82-83; K. Moore, “Iron Works at Stanley;” “The Stanley Works at Bridgewater, Mass.,” The Stanley Workers, Vol. I, No. 20, p. 3, July 25, 1918; this latter source was found in the files of the Bridgewater Public Library; D. Moore, Images of America: Bridgewater, pp. 9-11; the story describing the purchase of the iron company’s lot and buildings (one of them rented by Hooper & Co.) on the northwest corner of Central Square by P. O. Clark and subsequent acquiring of the property by A. I. Simmons can be found on pages 3 and 17 of my essay on
Thomas Kennedy, for instance, “was terribly burned about the face, hands, and breast” in an industrial accident just after Christmas in 1896. Boding well for some continuity in leadership, John M. Stetson remained the firm’s manager, a position he had inherited in 1886 from his grandfather Nahum, who for so many years had been the driving force behind the iron works. On the other hand, Isaac Damon, associated with the company for over thirty years, holding “various positions of trust and responsibility,” decided in early 1894 to accept an offer to work for the Atlas Tack Corporation in Boston. For some of the town’s older citizens, the death of Nahum Stetson, at the age of eighty-seven, on October sixth of the same year, most poignantly symbolized that the long era of the Bridgewater Iron Company, in effect, had ended. Work, nonetheless, continued at the site, including the manufacturing of hydraulic presses for a large firm in 1894 and electric car heaters and a “30-ton” casting in 1895. Two years later, it was announced that the Bridgewater Iron Company, the name still being used by the Bridgewater Independent, had “received a large order for materials for the construction of the Bridgewater, Whitman and Rockland electric street railway.”

Also part of Bridgewater’s manufacturing configuration were three smaller companies using iron in making their products. Known for manufacturing cotton gins, Bates, Hyde & Co., as it was known between 1833 and 1877, generally flourished in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, but not without organizational changes and occasional economic downturns. In 1877, following the death of Joseph A. Hyde, one of the founders and, undoubtedly, the firm’s central figure, the business was incorporated as the Eagle Cotton Gin Company. At this juncture, Samuel P. Gates, already associated with the enterprise for almost twenty years, became treasurer and until 1899 “owned a controlling interest in the business.” His office was conveniently located in the back part of the second floor of the building housing the Bridgewater Savings Bank, another business of which he was the treasurer. It was at his urging that Ferdinand G. Gammons, who, along with his wife Abbie (nee Lawrence), was a stalwart of Bridgewater’s new Methodist church, began his long association with the Eagle company, serving as its general manager and making periodic business trips to the Southern states in the interests of the firm.

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It might also be noted that Henry Perkins, known for running a foundry on Broad Street, served as the Eagle Company’s president in the 1880’s, and that in 1883 Harry W. Bragdon, an active member of the town’s Unitarian Church, began a long career as the firm’s “bookkeeper and general caretaker of accounts and general office business.”

The 1880’s was a good time for the Eagle concern. Following the recovery of the cotton crop after the Civil War, its gins were well-received by planters in the South and in foreign markets, including Constantinople, Turkey. With a work force of one hundred men and a monthly payroll of $5,000, 1886 was a banner year for the company. Physical signs that the town’s gin works were doing well included the laying of a side track from its Pearl Street site to the Old Colony’s main track, the construction of a new warehouse, and the installation of “one of the best automatic fire extinguishing systems.”

Observant folks in the town most likely took note of two new signs in the old Bank Building, “Savings Bank” and “Eagle Cotton Gin Co,” which in the summer of 1885 replaced “the ancient and time-worn boards so familiar to all.”

A thorough account of the Eagle company in the 1890’s, while not neglecting its local setting in Bridgewater, would have to be placed in the broader context of national economic developments. In late 1891, lack of business prompted the firm to temporarily shut down operations, a not uncommon reaction among the nation’s manufacturing firms facing similar situations. Since state or national unemployment compensation legislation had not yet been enacted, the Bridgewater cotton gin workers had to fend for themselves, hoping that operations at the factory would soon resume. It would appear that this happened in December when Gammons returned from a six-week trip through the Southern states, seeking orders for the company’s cotton gins. But in the fall of 1893, the firm’s future again seemed in jeopardy. In the middle of October, about two weeks after F. N. Crocker, one of its employees, sustained a bad cut on

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18 BI, Dec. 12, 1885, Feb. 4, 1910, Oct. 30, 1914, Crane, pp. 785-786; “Perkins, Henry, 1814 to 1901--Industrialist,” HH, p. 273; “Gammons, Ferdinand C., 1845 to 1929--Manufacturer,” HH, p. 264; “Gates, Samuel Pearly, 1837 to 1914--Manufacturer,” HH, pp. 264-265; John C. Rand, comp., “Samuel P. Gates,” One of a Thousand – A Series of Biographical Sketches of One Thousand Representative Men: Residents in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, A. D. 1888-1889 (Boston: First National Publishing Co., 1890), Vol. I, pp. 369-370; Townscape Institute, Form 32, pp. 127-128; Gates, whose wife Marcia and infant daughter, named after her mother, died in the first half of 1873, and from the 1880’s until his death in 1914 he lived alone in what is now known as the Gates House, a rather ornate dwelling, originally facing School Street; by the provisions of Gates’s will, the Normal School acquired this house, moving it in 1925 to the corner of Cedar and Grove Streets to make room for a new classroom and administrative building to replace the facilities destroyed in the disastrous fire of late 1924.

the head and a torn hand from a bursting emery wheel, the gin shop managers, apparently feeling the impact of the severest national depression to date, decided to suspend operations for at least three months because of the “scarcity of orders.” Showing concern for “a good many of our citizens out of employment,” the Independent also hoped the situation at the gin shop would “not seriously affect other business in town.”

The fortune of the company itself during the next few years was mixed. Gammons, as he had done since the 1880’s, continued to secure patents to improve the cotton gin, including ones for a “seed cotton conveyer,” and “a cotton gin blast flue.” Another indication of the Eagle’s innovative spirit was the erection of a new building in 1894, to be used almost exclusively for “performing experiments” with new machinery. In late 1895, the firm received a “handsome gold metal” at the Texas State Fair and Dallas Exposition for its contributions to the cotton gin industry. Many in the town soon knew about this award since the metal was prominently displayed in the show window of H. A. Clark’s jewelry store on the western side of Central Square. Despite this recognition, however, the company was not faring well at this juncture. Most likely impacted by the savaging of the cotton crops by the boll weevil beginning in 1894, business at Bridgewater’s gin shop was very dull in the fall of 1895, with operations “virtually shut down for an in indefinite period…” It was against this background of financial uncertainty that the Eagle Cotton Gin Company consolidated with the Continental Gin Company on December 1, 1899. With headquarters in Birmingham, Alabama, this rather loose conglomeration of local cotton gin plants in Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, Texas, and the one in Bridgewater was part of a sweeping consolidation movement in American business between 1899 and 1902.

The Henry Perkins Company was another important part of Bridgewater’s industrial base in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Starting out as a foundry in the rear of Bates, Hyde & Co. in 1848, this enterprise, as previously mentioned, was moved across the tracks of the Old Colony Railroad in 1864-65. The making of iron castings continued to be an important component of its operations, even as it turned to the manufacturing of tacks and nails. While the Bridgewater Iron Company was facing economic and labor problems in 1886, Perkins’ iron foundry was thriving, adding a brick addition to

house a new Putnam engine and employing over sixty men in making “miscellaneous castings,” including a large number of piano frames and smaller items such as grate bars. Like other manufacturing firms in Bridgewater, however, the fortunes of Perkins foundry and its workers were subject to the vagaries of the economy. In the spring of 1888, Perkins was “unable to keep up with his orders,” whereas in November of 1891 business was “so quiet that he “laid off some of his hands.” In February of 1894, the foundry workers must have cheered when a “hustle of new orders” resulted in ending the “alternate day work plan.”

In the middle of the 1880’s, the Perkins enterprise, under the name of Perkins Bros., also began manufacturing tacks and nails and the machines used in their making. Four tack machines were shipped to “Western parties” in the late summer of 1885, and in the following January “F. D. King’s four-horse team” conveyed three more of them to the McLathlin Bros. of nearby Kingston. An order for 25,000 pounds of carpet tacks from a company in Ohio five months later was indicative of the emerging importance of this part of Perkins’s business. Meanwhile, the growing demand for the firm’s wire nails of various sizes necessitated the need for more space and machines. With this in mind, the foundation for a new nail factory, measuring “35x80 feet… and 1 and 1-2 stories high,” was started in April of 1887. This new facility housed fifteen machines, including one weighing seven tons, making it “the largest wire nail machine in the eastern states.” One year later, the company’s nail business was so lucrative that this “new” building was extended by forty feet. At the same time, it was announced that a new process of coating and dressing the firm’s nails would allow them to “retain a much stronger hold on the wood…."

In what the Bridgewater Independent labeled “A New Departure,” Perkins Bros., already using their own nail machines, decided in 1890 to be even more self-reliant by starting a new wire-drawing mill, which running at full capacity would turn out ten tons of steel wire daily for making nails and “give employment to six or seven men.” In addition to selling their nail machines to other manufacturers, Perkins Bros. were now prepared to supply them with steel wire, the shipment of which was made easier by laying a spur track to the nearby Old Colony railroad line.

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23 BI, Aug. 22, Oct. 17, 1885, Jan 30, May 22, July 3, 1886, April 2, 1887, April 7, May 19, 1888, June 8, Oct. 5,
In one important way Perkins’s enterprise did not experience a “new departure” in the waning years of the nineteenth century. Unlike the larger Bridgewater Iron and Eagle Cotton Gin companies, his business was not caught up in the frenzy of competition and combination that led to basic organizational changes in many of America’s manufacturing concerns. As had been the case since 1848, Henry Perkins remained the head of this family-run business endeavor, astutely running it with help of other family members, including his son Ralph and brother Alfred H., who for over fifteen years was the foreman of the company’s foundry. One way to gauge the relative importance of this business in Bridgewater’s economy is to note that its products, especially castings and nail machinery, were invariably an important part of the Independent’s weekly report concerning shipments from the railroad station on Broad Street. Based upon his manufacturing enterprise and his substantial Greek Revival house on the corner of Main and Oak Street, which he had owned since the 1850’s, Perkins was contributing well over five hundred dollars to the town’s coffers by the middles of the decade, placing him among Bridgewater’s “Heavy Tax Payers.”

Adding to Bridgewater’s industrial base in the 1890’s was the shoe tack and nail manufacturing plant owned and operated by Henry J. Miller. Born in Hanover, Germany, in 1847, he came to Bridgewater at the age of twenty-four, following stays in England and India. After thirteen years as an engineer at the Bridgewater Normal School, he became one of the partners of Miller & Atherton, a firm specializing in the manufacturing of nail and shoe tacks. For its first five years, this company moved between Brockton, Bridgewater, and Campello (a section of Brockton), not a difficulty since the firm initially only had a small number of machines. Needing more space to keep up with increasing demands for its goods, the company, at the urging and help of the improvement society of Bridgewater, began its first stay in this town in the spring of 1886. The Independent praised the move, gently rebuking “some of the chronic croakers who have sneered at the attempt to encourage this firm to locate among us.”

Finding quarters in the old Joseph E. Carver cotton gin factory across from the railroad depot on Spring

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Nov. 2, Dec. 7, 1889; D. Moore, “Economy...,” HH, pp. 83, 86-87; “Perkins, Henry, 1814 to 1901--Industrialist,” HH, p. 273; Townscape Institute, Form 26, pp. 114-115; Flora T. Little, “Wreath of Memories,” no pagination; this last source, copies of which can be found in the Bridgewater Public Library, is an unpublished memoir of Flora Townsend Little, one of Bridgewater’s leading citizens of the twentieth century; for a short review of her life see HH, p. 272.

24 BI, March 15, 1890, Oct. 24, 1891, Nov. 3, 1894, April 6, 1895, April 18, Sept. 25, 1896, Aug. 13, 27, Dec. 3, 1897, March 14, 1902, Aug. 29, 1924; Townscape Institute, Form 114, pp. 301-302; Henry Perkins’s wife Amelia
Street, the enterprise was soon “cutting over a ton of tacks a day.” But most likely its confidence was undermined somewhat in late October when only quick action by its engineer prevented a fire of suspicious origins from getting out of hand. It was not long after the fire that this manufacturing endeavor relocated to Campello. But Bridgewater had not seen the last of this shoe tack business.\textsuperscript{25}

In the fall of 1889, Miller, now acting on his own rather than in partnership, returned to Bridgewater, buying the land and tack shop once owned by Solomon K. Eaton on Hale Street, another location close to the Old Colony railroad. While the purchase agreement included five tack machines and a boiler-engine, the new owner lost no time in “making extensive” changes to the building, most notably putting in a brick foundation to form a basement where the tack machines, some of which came from his previous location, would be placed. Perhaps realizing that some of the firm’s products would be sold locally, Miller also had a stable built on the east side of the shop. Two years after coming back to Bridgewater, despite rumors that a “big combination” would “freeze out” his enterprise, he commenced to build a fifty foot long addition to the front of his tack factory on Hale Street. By 1893, Miller’s twelve employees, with the help of steam power, were producing one ton of nails a day, which were shipped to customers in neighboring communities, Boston, New York City, and even some cities in the west; a far cry from the days when nails were made by the village smiths for local consumption. In addition to being one of Bridgewater’s important businessmen and taxpayers, Miller could also take pride in his family and contribution to the civic well-being of the town. He, his wife, nee Catherine Lynch, a native of Bridgewater, and their daughter and three sons had resided on Hale Street before moving in 1893 to a house on Broad Street, previously owned by A. S. Lyon, one of the town’s leading lumbermen and builders. More will be said about family members later, but it needs to be mentioned at this point that his oldest son Arthur C. started to work in his father’s company in the middle of the 1890’s. During this decade, the elder Miller, politically a Republican, became a member of Fellowship Lodge, the town’s

\textsuperscript{25} BI, March 27, April 10, Sept.11, Oct. 30, 1886, May 16, 1891, Feb. 1, 1901, March 25, 1910; in what proved not to be the last effort to lure a manufacturer to Bridgewater, the sum of $500, thanks to the improvement society, “was subscribed, toward defraying the expenses of removal;” this earlier improvement society, which especially sought to get businesses to locate in Bridgewater, should not be confused with the Bridgewater Improvement Association formed in early 1900’s and which continues to work diligently for the beautification of the town.
organization of Masons.  

Industrial activity also continued in Prattown in the late nineteenth century. While this eastern section of Bridgewater did not have the advantage of proximity to the Old Colony railroad, the manufacturing of paper, as had been the case since 1823, remained an important economic endeavor until the early 1890’s, on the site of a dam where the Town River and Plymouth Street intersect. In 1884, Joshua E. Crane, Bridgewater’s unofficial historian, wrote that the Hollingsworth Company, which had owned and operated the paper mill since 1857, is an “establishment…furnished with the most approved machinery for paper manufacturing, with both steam- and water power and is prosperous under” the management of Mark Hollingsworth Cornell. Echoing this evaluation, the Independent reported on January 4 of the same year: “The paper mill is running eighteen hours a day, and has added new machinery.” About a year and a half later, the company’s reliance on the Town River was highlighted when its water had to be “drawn off” to make repairs to the dam. During the rest of decade, the company appears to have done well as it “constantly” upgraded its machinery under Cornell’s leadership. But the days of this enterprise, which had been important to Prattown’s economy for almost forty years, were numbered.  

On November 5, 1895, the old Prattown paper mill, after laying idle for a short time, was purchased by a partnership of two brothers, George O. and Hiram H. Jenkins, residents of nearby Whitman, where for three decades they had run a successful business devoted to the manufacture of steel shanks. Realizing that the supply of leather to make shoes would not be able to keep pace with the nation’s increasing population, they immediately made extensive alterations to the paper factory and started, in a small way, to manufacture leather board, a product consisting of scrap leather and waste paper used in the making of shoe soles and heels. Within a year of its founding, Jenkins Bros., listed as a non-resident, became more than an average contributor to Bridgewater’s treasury. While the founders of this business continued to live in Whitman, later members of the Jenkins family, as we shall see, not only continued to control this leather board enterprise for over seven decades but, in some cases, chose to make
Bridgewater their home.\textsuperscript{28}

The last quarter of the nineteenth century also saw growth in Bridgewater’s brick manufacturing, with the brickyard on Plymouth Street, started by Mitchell Hooper and Jeremiah Townsend in 1830, being joined in 1891 by one owned and operated by Ernest L. Cook in the town’s Titicut section. Following the death of his partner in 1876, Hooper assumed full control of the business, but continued to rely on the help of his son George M. who had joined the enterprise in 1859. Mitchell Hooper & Co. did a brisk trade in the 1880’s. So great was the demand for the company’s bricks that production was nearly doubled in May 1884, and, two years later, the firm received an order for 580,000 bricks. During the span of these two years, the Hooper family had its share of sorrows, however. George M.’s wife Mary, especially respected and loved by family and members of the New Jerusalem Church, died at the age of forty-two on January 31, 1884, leaving her husband and six children “to mourn her untimely demise.” Almost three years after the death of his daughter-in-law, Mitchell Hooper, who from “small beginnings” had built up a large brick business, died at the age of seventy-eight. For the rest of the century, his son George M. not only ran this family enterprise, but remained active in the New Jerusalem Church, state and town government, and a number of organizations, including the Plymouth County Agricultural Society, Fellowship Lodge, and the Old Bridgewater Historical Library.\textsuperscript{29}

Taking advantage of the rich deposits of clay along the Taunton River, Ernest L. Cook established Bridgewater’s second commercial brickyard in late 1891. Located about a quarter of a mile south of the Titicut railroad station near the State Farm, the original area was later described as “wild and overgrown with timber as the wilds of Africa….” The unearthing of a brick kiln and bricks, most likely dating to the early 1700’s, during the preparation of the new yard was perhaps seen by the town’s latest entrepreneur as a vindication of the site he had selected. Cook’s industrial enterprise flourished from the start, with his “Diamond C” building bricks, known for their great durability, soon in great demand.

Within a year of its founding, the firm was asked to furnish bricks for a new building at what was now


\textsuperscript{29} BI, Feb. 8, May 30, 1884, Aug. 28, Oct. 16, 1886, Sept. 5, 1891, Nov. 18, 1893, Feb. 25, 1910, “Hooper, George M., 1838 to 1909,” HH, p. 266; Rand, One of a Thousand, p. 321; Representative Men and Old Families of Southeastern Massachusetts, p. 286; Townscape Institute, Form 185, pp. 440-441.
known as the State Farm. Indicative of the importance of Cook’s business to this section of Bridgewater, a new street in the vicinity of his brickyard was named after him in 1894. Business was especially brisk the following year, helped by “an important contract to furnish bricks for the extensive repair shops which the N.Y., N. H., and H. company” were starting to build at West Braintree. Using the nearby railroad to ship about six car loads of bricks a day for this particular project was made even easier in early 1896 when Cook put in a spur track connecting his yard to the main railway line. Equally auspicious for the future of the enterprise was his marriage in October of that year to Georgiana M. Wrisley since she would later serve as the company’s president. Despite Cook’s thriving business, it was not without problems. The case of Manuel Miller, who claimed “damages to the amount of $20,000 for injuries received while working” in the Titicut brickyard, illustrated the dangers of industrial accidents in the late nineteenth century and the lack of laws to immediately compensate workmen for injuries incurred in the workplace.  

The mass production of shoes, which would remain a mainstay in Bridgewater’s economy well into the twentieth century, is arguably the most important development in the town’s industrial growth in the very late 1800’s. As previously pointed out, shoes had long been made in Bridgewater, first by hand and, then, by seasonal workers in a cottage industry in which machinery began to play an increasing role in producing the finished products. David R. Moore, who for many years has delved into the town’s industrial history, suggests that the Bridgewater Industrial Company probably pioneered in the use of modern machinery in a “Shoe Shop” on Hale Street between 1860 and 1880. As reported by the Bridgewater Independent in February of 1879, the association, which owned the building, sold it, along with “one hundred feet of land on the above street,” to Levi Walker and Columbus Harlow. The new owners planned to rent space in the building after installing a source of power. About a month later, talk that a Boston company might soon establish its quarters in the building led to anticipations that the “regular squeal” of its pleasant whistle would sound again. Whether or not these hopes were ever fulfilled, the S. K. Eaton’s tack business, rather than a shoe enterprise, did occupy the site of the old shoe shop until it was sold to A. S. Lyon, a Bridgewater builder and lumberman, in March of 1888. In the fall
of the next year, Henry Miller, as mentioned earlier, purchased the property for his tack-making enterprise. 31

The push to establish Bridgewater as a thriving, if small, center of shoe manufacturing was not without obstacles. After describing the town as one of “the most beautiful in Massachusetts,” one old citizen in 1884 opined that its business was not in a “living state,” suggesting that too many workers relied on the “Iron Works” and “Gin Shop” for employment. At the opposite end of the spectrum, “a gentleman” at a church prayer meeting in early 1889, reportedly thanked “God” for not having “any shoeshop workmen and their children in this town for our children to associate with.” By the time this sentiment had been expressed, the declining fortunes of the Bridgewater Iron Company had made many citizens receptive to a drive by the Bridgewater Improvement Society to lure manufacturing firms, including those making shoes, to Bridgewater. Not to be confused with the Bridgewater Improvement Association established in 1901, this early group was formed in 1885 and mainly consisted of businessmen who put a high priority on expanding the town’s industrial base. At a meeting in early 1887, this organization, aware that two shoe firms desired to locate in Bridgewater and that nearby Brockton was prospering as one of the nation’s largest shoe producers, discussed possible sites for two factories, each costing $12,000 to $15,000. 32

It was not until 1890-1891, however, that local efforts to get new shoe shops in the town was finally realized. Thanks to the efforts of three men, including Henry O. Little, who had just started a box company on the corner of Spring and Plymouth Streets, a “shoe shop” was built between Hale and Spring Streets, close to Plymouth Street, on a site later occupied by the Eastern Grain Company. Between 1891 and 1894, this factory of two and a one-half stories, measuring “125x35 feet,” was rented by the R. W. Cone & Co. This enterprise enjoyed certain advantages, including proximity to the railroad station, power and heat provided by Little’s Bridgewater Box Company, and location in a town that had recently opted for a central waterworks and a “first-class electric lighting plant,” albeit owned and operated by

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31 BI, April 1, 1876, Feb. 15, April 1, 1879, March 10, 1888; Crane, p. 796; Tales Around the Common, p. 7; D. Moore, “Economy…,” HH, p. 84; HH, pp. 143, 180; for the chronology of the Bridgewater Industrial Company’s operations, I relied on the lists of events prepared by Dr. Ralph S. Bates for History Highlights; see page 19 of this essay.

private companies. Despite providing employment for a significant number of workers during its “good runs,” Cone’s concern during its three-year stay in Bridgewater was beset by periodic closings. Whatever the reasons for this enterprise’s uneven performance, it created uncertainty and hardship for its employees, especially during the severe national depression of 1893. Typical of the nineteenth century approach to helping workers during hard times, a meeting of citizens representing the town’s manufacturing concerns and churches met a few days before Christmas of that year and appointed a committee of nine to prepare a “plan for systematic oversight of deserving cases so as to insure relief where needed and to prevent miscellaneous and indiscriminate giving.” How much aid was dispensed to unemployed shoe workers of Cone’s factory is difficult to say. What we do know is that this company, after not doing well during the first half of 1894, decided to leave Bridgewater.33

In spite of the depression, William H. McElwain, the eldest son of Reverend John A. McElwain, long associated with the Clarenden Street Baptist Church in Boston, decided to lease the vacated building. By September, Bridgewater was again manufacturing shoes. Only twenty-seven at the time, McElwain had worked at a shoe factory in Brookfield, Massachusetts, advancing from office boy to general manager. Within a month of beginning his new enterprise, he formed a partnership with Walter F. Shaw, who was running a shoe shop in nearby Elmwood, a section of East Bridgewater. Under this arrangement, it was agreed that all operations would now be done in the McElwain-Shaw shop in Bridgewater, with many of the Elmwood operatives as part of the workforce. Starting with the small investment of $10,500, including $1,500 of McElwain’s own money, this firm was soon providing employment for forty to fifty hands, some of whom worked in a new cutting room in the “upper story of the factory…, lighted by sky lights.” Orders came in “so fast” that employees were “obliged to work considerable overtime,” pushing the weekly payroll by April of 1895 to $1,000. Another indication of the enterprise’s well-being was its shipment of 176 cases of shoes from the nearby railroad station for the week ending April 4, 1895. Despite these positive signs for the McElwain-Shore shoe shop, it was at this time that the business had its first labor problem. Four treers went on strike, demanding an increase in

20, 1908.
regular wages. McElwain refused, and the men “went back to work at the old price.” While hardly a threat to the firm’s initial success, this dispute, with hindsight, might be seen as an omen of labor problems that would beset the McElwain shoe enterprise in its two decades in Bridgewater.34

For the next three years, the company continued to do well, even as it experienced managerial and physical changes. By mutual consent, McElwain and Shaw dissolved their partnership in July of 1895, with the business assuming the name of William H. McElwain & Co.; shortly thereafter, McElwain occupied the house of John F. Stetson on South Street. In December, his firm was employing about one hundred hands, a number that made for cramped conditions in the present shop. Anticipating a doubling of the workforce in 1896 to meeting the growing demand for the firm’s shoes, McElwain asked the building’s owners for a substantial addition to his present quarters. Having assumed control of the lumber yard next to their factory, the investors of the box enterprise, who had financed the building of the shoe shop in 1890, felt they were not in a position to support an enlargement of the McElwain facility on their own. Fearful that Bridgewater might lose this profitable shoe enterprise, the Independent on December 21, 1895, carried an article entitled “Keep the Business Here,” asking other individuals to heed the proposal of the shop’s original owners to invest in the expansion project. Evidently the request was heeded, and two months later McElwain’s occupied the new section of the plant. For the next two years, the business prospered, as shown by statistics in production, railway shipments, and taxes. It also benefited from receiving electrical lighting and additional power supplied by Little’s nearby box factory. At the end of 1897, McElwain, along with others in the shoe industry, anticipated a “very bright” future.35

Most likely, he had decided at this point, however, that more space would be needed if his business were to continue its expansion in Bridgewater. With other Massachusetts communities, including Brockton, North Easton, and Whitman, making it known that they would like to be the home of McElwain’s firm, a public meeting was held in the Bridgewater law office of Frank E. Sweet “to consider the question of providing more room for the shoe factory.” Samuel P. Gates and Lewis G. Lowe, two of the original investors of the Bridgewater Box Company, indicated they were no longer interested in

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34 BI, Sept. 8, Oct. 6, 1894, Feb. 2, March 2, 23, 30, April 6, 13, May 18, 1895; The McElwain Stride, Vol. 1, No.4, Jan. 1921, pp. 1-4; this source was found in the files of the Bridgewater Public Library; Townscape Institute, Form 155, pp. 379-380; “McElwain, William Howe,1867 to 1908--Manufacturer,” HH, pp. 271-272.

35 BI, July 13, Aug. 3, Dec. 14, 21, 1895, Feb. 29, March 28, April 18, May 23, Sept. 25, Nov. 27, Dec. 4, 18, 25, 25,
putting more money into the shoe shop, and suggested that a group of citizens might wish to buy the
building, “make the required improvements and additions, and rent it to McElwain & Co. at a reasonable
rate.”  During the course of the meeting, McElwain was “telephoned for” and requested to present his
views in person.  After making the case for increasing the size of shoe shop, which, he pointed out, was
already providing jobs for 200 workers and manufacturing ninety dozens pairs of shoes a day, he tactfully
made it clear that he would consider offers from other towns if Bridgewater was unable “to furnish the
requisite building,-etc.”  Before leaving the town “for a business engagement,” McElwain gave “the
citizens until the 10th of February to make up their minds what they could or would do.”36

Meeting this deadline soon became a moot point.  In the first week of February, a fire, most
likely caused by spontaneous combustion, “destroyed the factory and all its contents,” the loss being
placed at $75,000.  Realizing that many workers depended on this shoe company for their livelihood, a
sizable group of local investors, having great faith in McElwain’s personal integrity and business acumen,
formed the Bridgewater Shoe Company, with Hosea Kingman as president, to erect a new building to
accommodate McElwain’s manufacturing endeavor.  Heading a list of eighty or so investors were Gates
and Lowe, buying thirty and twenty shares respectively.  Under the leadership of Gates, $20,000 was
raised, and in the remarkably short time of five months a long multistoried factory was erected on a lot
purchased from John M. Stetson, across from the Eagle Cotton Gin works on Pearl Street.  By 1899,
McElwain, who had a ten-year lease of the premises, could boast that his 350 employees were turning out
2000 pairs of shoes daily in this modern wooden factory sandwiched between the railroad tracks and
Perkins Street, a new thoroughfare connecting Broad and Pearl Streets.  The structure still stands,
reminding Bridgewater’s inhabitants that their town was once an important center of shoe production.
Few, if any, now recall the days when this company, using simplified methods of production, was known
for the quality of its two dollar shoes.37

36 BI, Jan. 21, 28, 1898; one suspects that some would-be investors at the meeting took note of McElwain’s
observation that half his workers were not residents of Bridgewater, but might move here if more housing were built;
getting on in years, Lowe, the founder of Bridgewater’s most important insurance agency, lived in Boston by the
mid-1890’s; his son Gustavus was doing much of the firm’s work at this point.
37 BI, Feb. 11, 25, March 4, 18, 25, May 20, Dec. 16, 1898; Feb. 20, 1903, Jan. 17, 1908; “Ten Years Ago,” BI,
March 13, 20, 1908; Townscape Institute, Form 155, pp. 379-380; “McElwain, ...-Manufacturer,” HH, pp. 271-272;
Booklet.; this source was found in the files of the Bridgewater Public Library; Tales Around the Common, p. 5; D.
Moore, Images of America: Bridgewater, p. 16; Pictorial History, 1987, p. 54.
Three other firms of the 1890’s, two of which figured hardly at all in Bridgewater’s industrial scene as the new century began, merit some comments. While our references to the Bridgewater Box Co. to this point have been about the contribution of its owners to the building of facilities to house the town’s emerging shoe industry, the making of wooden boxes by this firm was in itself an important component of the town’s manufacturing efforts between 1890 and 1898. Making use of local stands of pine trees, a large box business had been carried on at the Eagle Cotton Gin shop in the 1880’s, but apparently “was not on a paying basis.” With this in mind, new management under Henry O. Little and Elijah B. Gammons purchased from Nahum Stetson in February of 1890 a lot of land “bounded by Plymouth and Spring Streets,” on which to build a new box shop. Little also had the foresight to buy a lot of land and a house on Plymouth Street which would enable him to run a spur track between the railroad and his planned box board mill. Using bricks from the torn-down gas house in the rear of A.I. Simmons’s meat market in Central Square, workers were soon laying the foundation for the new box factory. In early November, machinery from the Eagle plant was moved to its new home. With Little as president, Gammons as treasurer, and Gates and Lowe joining them as directors, the Bridgewater Box Company, boasting an initial capital stock of thirty thousand dollars, was ready for business.38

The years 1891 and 1898 were generally good ones for this enterprise. In four large buildings on an area of eight acres, fifty men produced wooden packing boxes of every variety, demand coming mainly from Boston, New York, and Brockton. The company became so prosperous that it bought large tracts of land in Maine to supplement the dwindling local supply of box logs. Little was personally in charge of the Maine operations, making sure the logs, cut at portable saw mills, reached Bridgewater by rail. For five years, his son Walter S., who had not yet formed the Eastern Grain Company or married Flora Phillips Townsend, attended to the part of the business in Bridgewater, serving as its bookkeeper. In late 1893, the company expanded its activities by establishing a lumberyard on an adjacent lot of land leased from Mrs. A. S. Lyon, whose husband, suffering financial misfortunes, had been forced to give up a similar business on this site. Freight shipments from the nearby railroad station further illustrate the good times experienced by the Bridgewater Box Co. in the middle of the decade. Eleven carloads of boxes, for instance, were transported by rail during the first week of 1896. Hopes for continuing the

38 BI. Jan. 11, 1884, Aug. 22, 1885, Jan. 21, 1888, Feb. 22, March 22, April 12, May 3, Oct. 25, 1890, Dec. 21, 1895;
firm’s prosperity were voiced in the following year when Little patented a new fruit basket, “solidly made of pine.” But by early 1898, the company faced a major “difficulty” -- its inability “to secure labor at a price low enough to compete, in all branches of their business.” At his point, Little severed his connection to the Box Co., toying with idea of removing “the basket industry to a new location.” In the meantime, his son Walter purchased the “interest of the Box factory,” formed a new corporation, and planned to “continue the business at the old stand.” Things did not quite work out this way, however. Not long after suffering a major fire on September 7, 1898, the company decided to close its doors and in 1900 petitioned the Superior Court for the right to dissolve. But Bridgewater had not seen the last of the enterprising endeavors of Henry and Walter Little.39

As Little’s box enterprise was reaching the end of its productive years in Bridgewater, two additional industrial enterprises were added to the town’s list of manufacturing endeavors. In what would prove to be an erratic and unproductive stay in the town, Shawmut White Lead Company, headed by George D. Coleman of Boston, decided to move to Bridgewater rather than rebuild its factory recently gutted by fire. In what was considered a bargain, this firm in August of 1897 secured an industrial building on Spring Street, across from the railroad depot. Known at this time as the Ferguson building, this structure, no longer extant, had undergone physical changes and had housed a number of enterprises for over fifty years, including the Southern Cotton Gin Co. (commonly called the Carver gin shop) from 1840 to 1880, before being taken over by the Shawmut firm. It was expected that some limited operations, employing about thirty workmen, could start within two weeks. Taking a longer view, however, the new owners, anticipating “about $1000 worth of the products, a day, when the factory is in its intended working order…,” began in late 1897 to extensively repair and refashion the old property. But hopes that the company would be an immediate success proved to be wistful thinking as the start of operations kept being delayed; as we shall shortly see, manufacturing of its products did not begin until early 1901. In 1898, with less fanfare but more success, William B. May rented a new section of Miller’s

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39 BJ, July 4, Nov. 7, Dec. 26, 1891, April 9, June 25, Aug. 6, Dec. 10, 1892, Nov. 11, 1893, Oct. 13, 1894, March 23, April 6, 27, May 18, July 20, 1895, Jan. 11, April 18, Sept. 11, 1896, May 14, 21, July 9, Aug. 6, 13, Sept. 16, 1897, Feb. 25, March 4, 11, 1898, May 4, 1900; “Little, Walter Sweet, 1873 to 1962--Merchant,” HH, p. 271; perhaps because of its short tenure in Bridgewater, the Bridgewater Box Co. has received little attention in the secondary sources covering the 1890’s; born in Connecticut, Henry O. Little, overshadowed by his son Walter S. in the annals of Bridgewater, was an important player in the economic, political, social and civic life of Bridgewater for
Shawmut Lead Works
(Pictorial History, 1987, p. 56.)
tack factory on Hale Street to house an enterprise specializing in the manufacturing of slippers. Taking advantage of the nearby railroad station, this nascent business was soon shipping a small number of cases to a variety of customers. May’s concern continued into the new century, but not without changes in location and the type of goods produced.  

The foregoing discussion of Bridgewater’s pre-1900 industrial endeavors is not inclusive, but should aid in understanding the manufacturing economy of the town as the twentieth century began. Three days before New Year’s Day, 1900, the Bridgewater Independent predicted that the coming year would be a good one for the town, given its numerous advantages for manufacturing endeavors. The editorial, after wishing “every one of its many readers a Happy and Prosperous New Year,” stressed the role of the “merchants, capitalists, and business men” in promoting the interests of the town, but said nothing specific about its farmers or industrial workers. This omission is a reflection of the widespread, but not always true, national belief at the time that if business flourished all those who were willing to work would have jobs and all would be well. In any case, Bridgewater, with an abundance of “favored sites for factories and mills” had become an industrial community, albeit a small one of about six thousand inhabitants. Its industrial enterprises had a total capital investment of $866,911 and produced goods valued at $2,075,377. On average there were 838 workers in the manufacturing sector of the economy who collectively earned wages of $478,381. Thirty-nine salaried officials in Bridgewater’s industries shared almost $40,000. The federal census does not give the profits or wages of individual proprietors and other firm members per se, but simple mathematic divisions clearly indicate the disparity in income between industrial workers and owners and/or managers. Of the total numbers of workers, 705 were males, 127 females, and only six children under the age of 16, even though state law only mandated school attendance until the age of 14. The citing of these statistics perhaps seems pedantic and uninteresting, but when compared to the ones on agriculture, they make it clear that Bridgewater in 1900, as it had been for many years, was far more of an industrial town than a farming one.

In 1900, McElwain’s business was flourishing, making far more shoes than did his earlier

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40 BI, July 31, 1889, Aug. 15, 1891, June 18, Aug. 13, 20, Nov. 26, 1897, Dec. 16, 1898, Feb. 15, July 19, 1901; Townscape Institute, Form 205, pp. 484-485; Pictorial History, 1987, p. 56; James Ferguson, for many years the superintendent at the Iron Works, owned this building from the middle 1880’s until his death around 1890.

partnership with Walter F. Shaw in 1894 and doing better than the stagnant shoe businesses in nearby towns. The new factory now employed almost 450 hands and was producing about 3,000 pairs of shoes per day. Its weekly shipments of shoes by railroad ran between 900 and 1200 cases, indicative of McElwain’s leading role in the town’s manufacturing output. The property taxes paid to the town by the Bridgewater Shoe Company, which had financed the construction of the building, were considerable, but not in the same league as those of the Brockton, Bridgewater, & Taunton Street Railway Co., with its much larger land holdings. The investors in McElwain’s, very bullish on its future prospects, agreed to build a hundred foot addition to the plant. Hopefully this would raise employment to 650 hands and would entail a payroll of close to $325,000. McElwain also signed a fifteen year lease of the enlarged plant, dating the agreement back to July 1, 1898, when he had first occupied the main part of the structure. Perhaps some of Bridgewater’s old shoemakers of earlier years paid visits to the mill on Perkins Street and were amazed that different parts of manufacturing process were each housed on one of the four levels of the building and that a very high percent of the wall space was made up of windows “to provide natural lighting for the workers.” Inhabitants of the town, including the shoe workers, probably had no idea that McElwain Company was on a path which would lead it to the top of shoe manufacturing in the world. What is clear is that, thanks to this firm, Bridgewater at the start of the twentieth century had joined a number of surrounding communities in the mass production of shoes. If its national placement was far below Brockton, which ranked number one in the nation with an annual shoe production worth almost twenty million dollars, Bridgewater shoe output was valued at $1,230,589, placing it 42nd in the national ranking. This was a good showing for a town of not quite 6,000 inhabitants.42

Given Bridgewater’s history of iron manufacturing, it is not surprising that this industrial activity remained a vital element in the town’s economy in 1900. After the failure of the Bridgewater Iron Manufacturing Company and the start of a “phased” takeover of its operations by the Stanley firm of New Britain, Connecticut, in the 1890s, iron manufacturing at the High Street-Town River location continued for several years, under the aegis of the Bridgewater Foundry, Machine & Rolling Mill Company. In reality, this enterprise was owned by the Connecticut firm, but the official change of name to “The

42 BI, Jan. 26, March 2, 23, May 11, June 1, July 20, Aug. 10, Dec. 7, 1900; “Ten Years Ago,” BI, April 29, 1910; U.S. Census, 1900, Vol. IX, pp. 747-748; D. Moore, Images of America: Bridgewater, pp.16-18; the pictures in this last source are most helpful.
Stanley Works” was not made until late November of 1903. Even before this, however, the new owners had begun to modernize the buildings and machinery. While output was not what it had been in the 1860’s and 1870’s, it was reported in 1900 that business in the big plant of the Bridgewater Foundry “has increased to such an extent that they are now doing more work that they have done for the past 15 years.” Another sign of the revitalization of iron manufacturing was this company’s number two spot on the roster of the town’s heavy tax payers in 1900. Nevertheless, its tax payments and work force, a good portion of which was still Irish, were much smaller than that of the old Bridgewater Iron Works in its haleyon days of thirty years earlier. In many ways 1893 to 1901 was a transitional period for the iron-steel industry in Bridgewater. What will become very evident as we look at the first decade of the twentieth century is that a new chapter of this manufacturing saga will enfold as the Stanley Works becomes an important and integral player in the economic life of the town.43

Not without occasional blips in their businesses, three other established firms that used iron in their products continued to operate successfully in Bridgewater as the new century opened. Still referred to by many as the Eagle Cotton Gin Works, this operation on Pearl Street had become in 1899 part of the Continental Gin Company, a national corporation with headquarters in Birmingham, Alabama. Ferdinand C. Gammons, manager and vice-president of the Bridgewater plant, traveled twice in 1900 to the southern states in the interests of this company. Production, thus employment, was uneven in this year, with busy times in June and July and a temporary shut-down in November. The fluctuations of any business during this era were especially hard on workers since no work meant no pay, and unemployment compensation was not yet a component of the American economic system. The importance of the Continental Company to the town’s economic well-being can be seen in its fourth rank among tax payers and its weekly mention in the listing of companies taking advantage of the railroad to ship its goods. The Perkins Foundry and Machine Company, Bridgewater’s oldest family-run industrial firm and a leading contributor to the town’s tax coffers, continued to fare well under Henry Perkins, who had founded the company in 1848. Its location along the northern side of the railroad tracks proved to be advantageous for the shipment of its tack and wire nail machines. A newcomer compared to the Perkins enterprise, the Miller shoe tack and nail factory on Hale Street was by the turn of the century an integral component of

The Henry Perkins Company

(Historical Highlights, p. 82; David R. Moore, Images of America: Bridgewater, p. 12.)
the Bridgewater’s industrial scene. Henry John Miller at fifty-three continued to personally run his business. Since the 1890’s, however, he had had the satisfaction of having his older son Arthur C., three days after completing his schooling at the Bryant & Stratton business college, begin the process of learning “the business from the floor up, working for the first six or eight weeks for nothing…” After this period of apprenticeship, he received the astounding sum of fifty cents a day! Little did the son and father know that the broadening of the family’s involvement in the company’s operations would ensure its survival following a runaway accident that resulted in the death of the senior Miller in January of 1901.44

One company that disappointed the investors and the town in general in 1900 was the Shawmut White Lead Works on Spring Street. When this firm bought the old Carver Gin Shop in 1897 and began the process of repairing and rebuilding the premise to make “red lead, mineral orange, and litharge and suboxide of lead…,” it was thought that operations would soon begin. This prediction and future ones proved to be wrong. From mid-1900 to early 1901, there were various reasons given for the delay in production, such as the non-arrival of certain machinery and the need for alterations in the engines. It was reported by the Independent in February 1901 that the Shawmut works would “soon be running on full time and with a large pay roll.” More about this shortly.45

Bricks continued to be produced in Bridgewater in 1900. In August, the part of Hooper’s brick yard that had recently been destroyed in a fire was rebuilt, and the weekly list of shipments from the town for the week of October twenty-first included nine railroad cars of bricks from the G. M. Hooper & Co. A month later, however, this firm announced its absorption by the New England Brick Company, a big combine which was in the process of taking under its control the large brick yards in New England. The Bridgewater part of this consolidated company continued to operate at the Plymouth Street-Town River location where brick-making had gone on for seven decades. In the meantime the E.L. Cook Company had just finished nine years of brick manufacturing at Titicut in the southern part of the town. A new chapter for the Bridgewater brick industry, however, was about to unfold as events in 1901, discussed in

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the next section, will make clear.\textsuperscript{46}

\textbf{Manufacturing in Bridgewater, 1901-1910}

Since the W. H. McElwain Co., manufacturer of shoes, was Bridgewater’s leading employer during the first decade of the twentieth century, it is appropriate to begin our discussion of the town’s industries during these years with an extended look at this important enterprise. It continued to operate in the four story building constructed on Perkins Street in 1898, financed mainly by a group of stockholders incorporated as the Bridgewater Shoe Factory Company. The directors of this company, well-known figures in the life of the town, including W. H. McElwain, met regularly to declare its semi-annual dividend. The McElwain factory continued to upgrade its machinery, mass produce its inexpensive but durable and stylish shoes, provide round-the-year employment for many workers in Bridgewater and other communities, and take great pride in striving for scientific management. One of the company’s publications averred that its attempts to eliminate waste and inefficiency through the so-called stop watch method was done “entirely independent and without knowledge of what was being done along the same line by Mr. Frederick W. \textit{[not L.]} Taylor and others in Philadelphia and which resulted in what is known as the ‘Taylor System’.” Many historians of early twentieth century United States cite the concept of efficiency as a key element in understanding American life, including efforts at reform, from the late 1890’s to around 1920.\textsuperscript{47}

Whatever the claims that scientific management would guarantee stability and progress of a business, the McElwain firm, Bridgewater’s pioneer in the mass production of shoes, naturally had its ups and downs in these years, striving for continuity, but also coping with change. Production, shipment, and employment figures varied in the first decade of the twentieth century owing to a variety of factors, including labor unrest, swings in the economy, and competition. In 1901, the McElwain factory, for

\textsuperscript{46} BI, June 1, Aug. 17, Oct. 26, Nov. 30, 1900, Feb. 25, 1910.
\textsuperscript{47} BI, April 5, 12, 19, July 12, Sept. 6, 1901, Feb. 21, March 7, Oct. 31, July 17, 1903, Jan. 1, Feb. 26, 1904, June 30, 1905, Feb. 23, 1906, Feb. 28, 1908; \textit{The McElwain Stride}, Vol. I, No. 4, Jan. 1921, p. 4; \textit{Pictorial History}, 1987, p. 54; D. Moore, \textit{Images of America: Bridgewater}, cover, pp. 16-17; Moore writes that McElwain’s “labor force, \ldots was made up of mostly immigrants;” I think more research is needed on this point since many of the Bridgewater’s Irish who worked in the factory in the early 1900’s were born in Bridgewater or elsewhere in Massachusetts and other parts of the United States; for an extended discussion of Frederick W. Taylor see: Samuel Haber, \textit{Efficiency and Uplift}.
instance, was “taxed to its utmost capacity,” with 725 hands producing 4200 pairs of shoes daily. By way of contrast, 1907 was not a banner year as the firm felt the impact of a brief national downturn in the economy, which only added to the company’s problems created by labor unrest in the previous year. Prosperous times began to return in 1908 as evidenced by the resumption of Saturday employment, an announcement that new workers would be needed, and the prediction that one order of 3000 dozen pair of shoes would soon be shipped from the factory. Any full discussion of the financial condition of the McElwain enterprise in Bridgewater during its first decade, it needs to be pointed out, would have to be placed in a broader context. Not only did the company proceed to locate its business office in Boston but, at the start of the century, began the process of expanding its production by establishing factories in Newport and Manchester, New Hampshire. By 1910, McElwain’s was recognized as a world leader in shoe manufacturing. Conversely, its dominance in Bridgewater was beginning to be challenged, as we shall see, by another shoe company.⁴⁸

During the heyday of McElwain’s operations in Bridgewater, there were some significant changes in the company’s top leadership and in the upper echelon of its management. Between 1894 and 1904, McElwain and his wife Helen W. made their home in Bridgewater and, like a number of other newcomers whose entrepreneurial activities helped promote the town’s growth and economic prosperity, were readily accepted by the town as an important part of the community’s economic, social, religious, and civic life. Interestingly enough, many town citizens in the twentieth century would associate McElwain’s name more with the school on Main Street named after him in 1913, than with his shoe business on Perkins Street. How many remembered that he served as an elected member of the school committee is another matter. Two events of 1904, however, did portend a change in McElwain’s and his company’s relationship to Bridgewater. Reflecting the firm’s growing emphasis on its activities in Boston and New Hampshire, the McElwain family moved to Boston, and the firm announced its intention of building another large factory in Manchester, New Hampshire, a move which McElwain denied was the beginning of the end of its operations in Bridgewater. Four years later the town was shocked to hear of his sudden death at the age of forty, after an operation for appendicitis. With the legal aid of Louis D.

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⁴⁸ BI, Aug. 2, Sept. 6, 1901, April 11, Aug. 29, 1902, April 15, Oct. 21, 1904, July 14, Aug. 16, Nov. 15, 1907, Jan
W. H. McElwain Shoe Company
(David R. Moore, Images of America: Bridgewater, p.16)
Brandeis, a well-known Boston lawyer and a future justice of the United State Supreme Court, a smooth transition to new leadership was made with James Franklin McElwain, William’s thirty-four year old brother, being appointed president of the firm. He had been associated with the company since its inception and, in 1901-03, had built a fine house on what became Park Terrace, overlooking the lush Boyden Park. But in 1904, he too moved his residency to Boston. There were also periodic changes in management, some of which had an impact on the company and the town. Before Fred L. Emerson was transferred to McElwain’s Boston office in 1904, for example, he not only had been the superintendent of the Bridgewater factory for eight years, but also had been active in town affairs, serving on Bridgewater’s board of auditors and on the Republican town committee. Four years later, Richard Hobart, who had been serving as superintendent of the factory, was also transferred to the Boston office.  

Much of what we know about McElwain’s operations in Bridgewater comes from company’s publications, which are valuable for insights into the managerial structure of the firm, but not for understanding the conditions of labor or the relationship between labor and capital. The paucity of primary sources on labor, except for union activities, does not help the situation. Workers at McElwain’s factory in Bridgewater generally did not keep diaries or write and preserve letters. Fortunately, a scanning of the Bridgewater Independent for the early twentieth century provides some facts and insights on the laborers of the McElwain factory. Industrial accidents, for example, were not all that uncommon in these years. Many mishaps were not of a serious nature and were easily treated by Bridgewater doctors such as Franklin L. Warren and Albert F. Hunt. Other accidents were far more serious, resulting in life-long disabilities. One worker in 1905 had all his left-hand fingers badly crushed when they were caught in the heel seat trimmer and was unable to continue in his work. McElwain’s record on industrial accidents was most likely not any worse or better than most other factories in Bridgewater, the state, or the nation, but is illustrative of this negative aspect of the industrial age. The Massachusetts state

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24, Aug. 21, Dec. 25, 1908.

49 BI, May 22, Sept. 4, 1903, Jan. 22, March 8, Sept. 30, 1904, Oct. 20, 1905, Jan. 26, 1906, Feb. 7, June 7, Oct. 11, Dec. 27, 1907, Jan. 10, 17, Feb. 7, 14, 1908, July 9, 1909; The McElwain Stride, Vol. I, No. 4, Jan. 1921, pp. 3-4; J. F. McElwain Company, 1922-72: Fiftieth Anniversary Booklet, no page-no publisher; Townscape Institute, Form 153, pp. 375-376; see pages 6 and 28 in my extended essay on education in Bridgewater between 1900 and 1910; thanks in good measure to the generosity of Dr. Marilyn White Barry, former Graduate Dean of Bridgewater State College, and her husband Dennis E., the J. Franklin McElwain House became the residence of the college’s president in 2005-2006 and is now known as the Barry House; the stone tablet in the foyer gives a brief history of the house and is based on the research and writing of Dr. Benjamin A. Spence, former Professor of History at Bridgewater State.
legislature in 1907 did pass a law requiring factories to keep a medical and surgical chest on the premise to be used in treating some industrial accidents. Whether the McElwain factory did so or not or was even informed of the requirement by the Board of Health is hard to say. Two of the town’s selectmen, it was reported, made light of the law, laughingly commenting that if they “bothered to enforce every new law that was passed” they “would have their hands full.” Evidently, the selectmen had faith that the factory owners would take care of the treatment of industrial accidents in their own way. Employers’ liability laws and workmen’s compensation systems had to be taken more seriously. Federal legislation was passed in 1906, but was successfully challenged in the courts. It was, therefore, left to the states to take action. In an effort to keep pace with some other states, Massachusetts re-fashioned its labor laws in this area just after 1910 to provide workers with greater long-term protection.\(^50\)

A site where industrial accidents occurred was not, naturally, the image that a big firm in a small town wanted to convey. Rather, McElwain’s wanted to be viewed as a place in which owners, managers, and laborers all worked together for the good of the company and, indeed, the community. In this scenario, laborers in the factory not only enjoyed their work, but also appreciated the benevolent and paternalistic treatment accorded them by those in charge. McElwain’s apparently planned and financed a number of social outings for groups of its employees, whether it be the annual outing of workers in the finishing and treeing department held at Nippenicket Pond or Titicut or a straw ride for a number of its young workers to Highland Park in Brockton. Some employees appreciated company-initiated changes in the work schedule, such as a new regulation in 1901 providing ten hours of pay for nine hours of work or the one in 1906 rearranging the weekly work schedule in the summer, allowing workers to have Saturday afternoon off. On the other hand, when it was rumored about the town during the business slump of 1907 that the plant might close for part of July, some of the workers complained that loafing this amount of time would impose hardship on them and their families, a valid concern before the advent of unemployment compensation in the United States. One thing that the McElwain’s management and labor force could agree on in 1907 was the decision to build a new fire escape, a wise move given the fact that the factory, although relatively new, was a wooden structure. Perhaps this decision prompted some

in Bridgewater to recall that several years earlier the newly-built McElwain shoe factory had agreed to house a new steam fire alarm whistle for the benefit of the entire town.  

Whatever achievements McElwain’s could rightfully boast about in the first decade of the twentieth century concerning its increased production, application of scientific management, economic importance to the town, or benevolent consideration of its workers, relations with its labor force were often tense, most notably in 1903, 1906-7, and 1909. In January 1903, influenced by union growth in nearby Brockton, local branch 357 of the Boot & Shoe Workers’ Union was formed in Bridgewater at a gathering in Benevolent Hall on Center Street. Closely identified at this time with St. Thomas Aquinas Church’s predominantly Irish congregation, this meeting place was a natural one since a good number of McElwain’s workers were Irish and, in many cases, members of other organizations which used this hall. Besides, this latest organization, whose early meetings were shrouded in secrecy, was not able to secure a meeting place in the center of the town. After it was organized, Local 357 proceeded to ask the McElwain Company to put the union label in its shoes, maintaining this would increase shoe prices, making possible an increase in the wages of workers. McElwain, in a circular to the employees, emphatically stated that the company would “not adopt the union stamp under any circumstances.” He was not opposed to the creation of the union, he went on to say, as long as individual workers could choose whether or not to join. Maintaining that the company alone understood the economic milieu in which it operated, McElwain asserted that the management must keep control of its business operations. This included decisions on pricing, if the firm were to remain competitive in selling its inexpensive but durable shoes in the wholesale market. Furthermore, it was the only way, in his view, to guarantee year round employment for its employees.  

There was some validity in McElwain’s views since statistics clearly show that Massachusetts shoe manufacturers had, by this time, begun to feel the competition from some mid-western states, which had certain advantages, including proximity to a plentiful supply of hides. It is not surprising that the shoe manufacturers in Massachusetts advocated the removal of the fifteen percent tariff duty on hides, while still supporting the import tax on shoes. Massachusetts, including Bridgewater, was a Republican  

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51 BI, July 12, 1901, Aug. 12, 1904, May 19, 1905, May 25, June 8, 1906, May 3, 17, June 7, 21, 1907, June 19, 1908.  
52 BI, Jan. 30, Feb. 6, 13, 1903; for a brief history of Benevolent Hall see page 86 in my discussion of Bridgewater
state and, thus, supported high tariffs to protect its industries, but the importation of cheap hides was deemed vital to its shoe industry, which ranked second behind textiles in the number of Bay State workers. While it is not possible to gauge public opinion on the issue of the company’s ability to pay higher wages and still keep its competitive edge, the Bridgewater Independent, admitting that it was not privy to the firm’s financial records, put great faith in McElwain’s position. Pliny Jewell, the editor of the paper, did not attack the union per se, but asserted that labor troubles were often caused “by a few irresponsible persons…”, and no socialistic or communistic doctrine should, in his view, preempt a company’s right to control its own affairs. The paper, reflecting a moderately conservative Republican viewpoint, however, did not probe into the larger issue of what would be a fair balance between adequate company profits and just wages for the workers.53

At a July meeting of about 250 union members, it was decided in a very close vote not to force the issue of wage increases until President McElwain returned from a European vacation. On his homecoming, McElwain promised to make a statement in October on the wage matter, which had been plaguing company-union relations for over nine months. When the firm, citing a shortage of orders, shut down the plant during the week prior to making known its stand on wages, many workers felt it was an intimation of what was to come. Denying any connection between the temporary shut down and its decision on wages, the McElwain Company announced that the wage scale would remain unchanged. In a curious blend of conciliation and threat, the firm indicated a willingness to lay before a committee of the workers’ choosing an explanation of “greater detail the data and reasons on which our conclusions are based,” but, in blunt language, warned that it would close the factory and move to another state if the existing wage scale was not accepted. Such a threat did not augur well for future capital-labor relations at McElwain’s in Bridgewater, but at this point, at least, no strike ensued. In the meantime, Local 357 began to show its social side by holding its first dance at Benevolent Hall in December at which Robert H. Ferguson, well-known for his work with the Bridgewater Band, played a cornet solo. It was becoming apparent that the shoe union was not just a bunch of outside troublemakers, but an increasingly accepted organization made-up of many working people in the town.54
As important as social activities were in promoting solidarity among union workers and creating a more positive image of Local 357 in the town, labor problems continued to flare up at McElwain’s, revealing not only differences between labor and capital, but also causing tensions in Bridgewater as it coped with social problems associated with industrialization. Without consulting the General Executive Board of the Boot and Shoe Worker’s Union, lasters and pullersover at the Bridgewater factory went on strike in late November of 1906, after the company refused to increase wages. One worker was struck in the jaw when he refused to leave his job, and the town police were brought in to prevent further trouble. President McElwain indicated some willingness to have the dispute arbitrated, but also appealed to the other workers in the plant not to join or support the strike. In a move that exacerbated tensions and set the stage for further trouble, the company decided to bring in some thirty replacements from its Manchester factory to do the work of those departments whose workers were on strike.\(^{55}\)

Adding to the complexity of the situation were certain social and ethnic divisions in the town and in the McElwain factory itself. The Massachusetts census of 1905 reveals that 71 percent Bridgewater’s inhabitants were American-born, including most of the Yankee-English citizens and a good portion of the Irish, who for half a century had made up the second largest percent of the town’s residents. The Irish also constituted about 30 percent of the almost 2000 of the town’s foreign-born. In light of Bridgewater’s rather homogeneous population (Yankee-English-Irish), perhaps it is not surprising that the Independent identified most of the eighty-three strikers as either Polish or Armenians, but with “a few Americans among the number.” Presumably the “Americans” were native-born or perhaps immigrants who had become naturalized citizens. The “strikebreakers” from New Hampshire were identified as Greeks, an ethnic group that hardly existed in Bridgewater at the time. It would be tempting to see such reporting as evidence of the bias against the so-called New Immigrants from the southern and southeastern parts of Europe, who by the early 1900’s made up the vast majority of the immigrants coming into the United States. This trend, however, had a greater impact on Bridgewater a bit later, and in 1905 the total population of Armenians and Polish in Bridgewater, whether native or foreign born, was only a few hundred of the town’s total population approaching 7,000. Identifying the more recent immigrants by their ethnicity, a practice which many of the older Irish in the 1900’s remembered well,

\(^{55}\) BI, Nov. 30, Dec. 7, 1906.
was to continue for a while into the twentieth century, whether motivated by innate prejudice, a “we
versus them attitude,” or as a way of clarifying episodes or situations in a society whose population was
becoming a bit more pluralistic. It should be also pointed out that James H. Dickinson, editor of the
Bridgewater Independent beginning 1905, was more evenhanded, if not pro-labor, in reporting and
commenting on the strike than his predecessor, Pliny Jewell, most likely would have been. Rather than
cast aspersions on the strikers, Dickenson thought it was “of transcendent importance to the town that an
early adjustment be made so that work may be resumed and any action that could be taken by the local
business organizations toward smoothing the way for a settlement would be worth the effort.” That
settlement would come, but not after one nasty day for all concerned.  

Early on the morning of December 6 rumors circulated that workers from McElwain’s
Manchester factory would arrive by rail that day in Bridgewater and be taken to Summer Street where
they would be housed in the Elwell house, which had remained vacant after its owner had moved from the
town a few years earlier. Somehow the strikers missed the arrival of the first contingent of replacements,
but were on hand when about twenty Manchester workers arrived in the early evening. The stage was set
for an ugly confrontation. Under the protection of fifteen law officers, including several Pinkerton
guards, the imported workers moved up Broad Street as the striking lasters hurled a barrage of expletives,
making clear their disdain for what they considered to be scabs, workers who took the jobs of union
workers on strike. Perhaps ethnic differences between the strikers and imported workers exacerbated the
hostility shown to the newcomers. The situation became even more tense when additional strikers, who
were holding a meeting in their quarters in Central Square, joined in what was emerging as a full-fledged
riot, made even more ominous by the possibility that several stones dislodged from the wall surrounding
Samuel P. Gates’s house on School Street would be used in the fracas. Suddenly, however, the threat of
violence dissipated when someone fired a revolver as the police and strikebreakers passed in front of the
Normal School’s Tillinghast Hall near the corner of Summer and Grove Streets. The crowd, including
the protesting strikers, immediately began to scatter, allowing the contingent of Greek workers from New
Hampshire to reach its destination. Years later, Louise Dickinson Rich described Elwell’s former
residence as “as a rambling house with wide porches, a mansard roof, and terraced lawns, which must

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have been impressive in its day.” The next morning these workers were escorted to the McElwain factory under the protection of the police.\textsuperscript{57}

Perhaps the events of December sixth had a sobering effect on both sides of this latest quarrel between labor and management of the McElwain shoe factory in Bridgewater. Shortly before Christmas, the strike was ended when McElwain and representatives of the Union agreed to discuss the possibility of an arbitration agreement. At a meeting the day after the holiday, it was decided to ask Louis D. Brandeis, a legal advisor to the McElwains, to draw such an agreement for the settlement of future troubles at the factory. Three weeks later the representatives of Local 357 and W. H. McElwain agreed to create a local board of arbitration. The \textit{Bridgewater Independent}, a bit too optimistically, declared that this outcome “is pleasing to those immediately interested and gratifying to the community at large as it insures the town against future industrial disturbances.”\textsuperscript{58}

The situation at McElwain’s did not immediately or completely quiet down, however. In early January 1907, about twenty of the Greeks brought to the town were still working at the factory and living at the Elwell House, while about half of the strikers had return to their jobs. Conditions were ripe for trouble. On the morning of January 11, the Greeks and the Armenians got into a melee in which hammers, lasts, and pinchers were used, leaving one of the Armenians with a serious head wound. By the time the town police arrived at the scene the trouble was over and the men had returned to their work. Some of the Greeks were arrested, fined, and forbidden to return to their jobs. Others not involved in the incident were permitted to continue working at the factory. By early April the last of the replacement laborers had vacated the Elwell House. Not long after, this imposing structure, at least by Bridgewater’s standards, was razed and, subsequently, a number of less imposing structures occupied this landed estate.\textsuperscript{59}

After the events of 1906-07, things calmed down at the McElwain factory. To be sure, price and wage scales continued to divide labor and management, but at least the mechanism of arbitration was in

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{BI}, Dec. 7, 1906, Jan. 4, 1907, Louise Dickinson Rich, \textit{Innocence Under the Elms} (Orleans, Massachusetts: Parnassus Imprints, 1983), pp. 99-100; this last source was first published in 1955; \textit{Tales Around the Common}, p.18. \textsuperscript{58} \textit{BI}, Dec. 21, 28, 1906, Jan. 18, 1907. \textsuperscript{59} \textit{BI}, Jan. 4, 11, 18, Feb. 8, April 15, 1907; Dickinson Rich, \textit{Innocence Under the Elms}, p. 101; \textit{Tales Around the Common}, p. 18; \textit{Pictorial History}, 1994, p. 18; this latter source states that the Elwell House on the corner of Park Terrace and Summer Street was made of brick and built by Solomon Washburn; the house now standing on the corner of Park Terrace and Summer Street was bought around 1913 by George Barney and his wife, Carrie, daughter
W. H. McElwain Shoe Company
(David R. Moore, *Images of America: Bridgewater*, p. 17.)
place and, indeed, was used in a labor dispute in 1909. Local 357, dominated by Irish leadership, gained membership as the decade drew to a close and became an increasingly respected organization in the town. When the Union announced its plans to hold a fair in the Town Hall in February 1908, it was heartily supported by the local merchants, and it was predicted that the affair might well “eclipse anything of the kind ever held” in Bridgewater. The fair’s planning committee, also composed of Irish workers, diligently planned the event, inviting important union leaders from Boston and Brockton to open and address the gathering. As if to dispel any notion that Local 357 was radical organization, the hall was elaborately decorated in American colors with the rear of stage draped by a huge national flag. The fair and bazaar was well-attended and proved to be a financial success. In its reporting, the Bridgewater Independent did not mention whether or not any of the top leadership of the McElwain company paid a visit to this public, but union-sponsored, event. It will be recalled, however, that the firm was in the process of re-organization following the unexpected death of W. H. McElwain. While the company would keep some of its operations in Bridgewater until 1915, it was clear by 1910 that it was paying more and more attention to its activities in New Hampshire and its quest, through consolidation and combination, to attain leadership of the nation’s shoe industry.

While there was no real challenge to McElwain’s position in Bridgewater as the leading shoe business until 1909, prospects were occasionally raised that additional shoe manufacturers might locate in the town. In April 1906, the Commercial Club, diligently working to bring new industries to the town, met to discuss the possibility of enticing Herbert Pratt & Co. of North Middleboro to locate in Bridgewater. A committee composed of Paul O. Clark, Samuel P. Gates, A. I. Simmons, George J. Alcott, and William Bassett, all well known for their roles in the town’s commercial life, tried to persuade this company to make its home in Bridgewater, but could not match the incentives offered by Middleboro. Toward the end of 1906, chances for another shoe firm in Bridgewater again increased when J. Gardner Bassett, an active member of the Commercial Club and owner of the Bridgewater Brick Company, decided to renovate the old exhibition hall of the Plymouth County Agricultural Society. This created a building of four floors to accommodate a shoe business or some other manufacturing firm. The location

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was enhanced by a rail spur already in place and being used by the brick company.⁶¹

Shortly after the building was ready for occupancy in November 1907, William B. May indicated his desire to move his slipper enterprise into the newly renovated structure. This business, located since 1898 in the Miller tack factory on Hale Street, was not a large one, but additions had been made to its quarters in 1901 and 1905, and its shipments by rail, although modest, were important enough to be listed in the Independent’s weekly reports, at least in 1901, along with those of larger companies like McElwain’s and the Continental Cotton Gin. By late 1907, May, unable to fill its growing list of orders at the Hale Street facility, decided to move to the newly reconstructed Bassett factory. To help expand his manufacturing operations, he sought the help of the Commercial Club in raising five thousand dollars. After a slow start, the capital was raised, and, by early February 1908, the outfit was able to turn on its machinery in the new factory. Hopefully, over fifty workers would be needed to sustain the increase in production once the plant was working at full capacity. This was not a negligible number in a town the size of Bridgewater, and it was predicted that the retailers in town would reap the benefits of this increase in May’s workforce.⁶²

Soon after May’s move, Silas W. Derby, deciding to relocate his shoe manufacturing business from Brockton to Bridgewater, also rented space in the Bassett building off Broad Street. He was familiar with Bridgewater, having been the superintendent at McElwain’s before opening his own factory in Brockton. May and Derby, although not entering into a formal partnership, agreed to manufacture their products in conjunction with each other by sharing the same machines. This arrangement ended, however, in August 1910 when Derby became the superintendent of the L. Q. White Shoe Company, a large firm that had come to Bridgewater a year earlier.⁶³

The genesis of the White’s company’s presence in Bridgewater began in 1908, ten years after the McElwain’s occupied its new quarters on Perkins Street. Owing in part to labor problems, several shoe companies wanted to leave Brockton, the nation’s leader in shoe manufacturing, and Bridgewater, along

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⁶² BI, Feb. 1, April 12, 26, May 17, June 7, 14, Aug. 2, 9, 16, 23, Nov. 15, 29, Dec. 6, 1907, Feb. 21, 1908; See my comments in another essay on the formation and work of Bridgewater’s Commercial Club between 1900 and 1910.
⁶³ BI, Aug. 7, Sept. 25, Dec. 25, 1908, Aug. 12, 1910; Townscape Institute, Form 153, pp. 375-376; after James Franklin McElwain had moved to Boston, Derby first rented and then, in 1909, bought the former’s house at 29 Park Terrace before moving to Illinois in 1911; in 2006, this building was renamed the Barry House and became the residence of the President of Bridgewater State College.
with nearby communities, hoped to attract these dissatisfied businesses. Many of the town’s citizens, led by civic and business leaders, wanted to see Bridgewater grow and were quick to recite a list of its many advantages. In a flourish of boosterism, the Bridgewater Independent on September 25, 1908, summarized them as follows:

With the splendid railroad accommodations, both steam and electric, the excellent educational opportunities, its many social organizations, churches presided over by a class of ministers ranking second to none [One would hope that the editor, James H. Dickinson, included the priests of St. Thomas Aquinas, the town’s largest church], the postal facilities, banking arrangements and its many fraternal orders to say nothing of the many attractions that are offered on the side, some one or more of the makers of shoes in Brockton might be induced to consider the town.64

Whether or not Loring Q. White, head of a shoe firm in Brockton since 1906, read this editorial, he did discuss the matter of establishing a shoe factory in Bridgewater in a conversation in late 1908 with J. Gardner Bassett, chairman of the Board of Trade, a component of the town’s Commercial Club. By Christmas time, this organization was fully engaged in a discussion about the possibility of bringing the White firm to Bridgewater. At this juncture the general public was not privy to the name of the company or the details of the negotiations that were being conducted. But in a project of this magnitude, which envisioned the construction of a large factory, it was only prudent for its proponents to involve the general public in this important economic matter. It was decided, therefore, to call a public meeting to be held in the Town Hall on January 1, 1909, to garner support for the building of a factory to house the L. Q. White Shoe Company. After hearing a number of speakers praise the plan and White’s reputation as a firm which “employs good labor and stands well in the estimation of shoe makers…,” the heavily attended meeting unanimously endorsed the project.65

The plan to finance and build the factory on Spring Street was similar to the one adopted in 1898 to construct the McElwain plant. White agreed to put up $10,000 of the estimated $40,000 that was the

64 BI, Sept. 25, 1908; Abrams, Conservatism in a Progressive Era, p. 229.
L. Q. White Shoe Company
(Pictorial History, 1987, p. 55.)
projected cost of the new structure. The rest was be raised by selling to the public fifty dollar bonds to be redeemed over ten years at a five percent annual interest rate. Close to seventy people, including some women, voiced their interest in investing in the new company, which envisioned occupying a four story structure, 300 feet long and 40 feet wide, and employing a labor force of 700, with Bridgewater citizens being given hiring preference. By March the construction of the town’s second large shoe factory began.66

Completed in record time, Bridgewater’s latest manufactory was formally dedicated on the evening of June 23, 1909, in ceremonies presided over by J. Gardner Bassett, who was now the President of the Commercial Club. Arthur C. Boyden, Principal of Bridgewater Normal, congratulated the town “upon the splendid public spirit which made possible the event and welcomed the guests to the factory and the new enterprise to the town…” In response, L. Q. White expressed his pleasure at meeting the people of Bridgewater and pledged his utmost to make the new enterprise a success. In a different vein, H.D. Packard, Chairman of the Board of Selectmen, after praising the town on the acquisition of a new business, “made a plea that the old traditions and the support of the old institutions of the town might not be forgotten in the new prosperity that had come.” Judge Robert O. Harris brought greetings and congratulations from East Bridgewater, jokingly saying that his town would accept the surplus if Bridgewater got too prosperous. Thanks to a number of committees, music, dancing, and refreshments added to festivities.67

Actual work began at the factory on July 6. Only the cutting room was in operation at first, but it was anticipated that other phases of production would soon follow. Owing to unfavorable market conditions, production initially was to be limited to only 200 dozen pair of shoes daily. From its beginnings, White’s, as did the rest of the shoe industry in New England, faced two interconnected problems: how to meet workers’ demands for higher wages and, at the same time, compete successfully with the growing shoe industry in the southern and western parts of the country which had the advantage of being close to the sources of raw materials. The first labor challenge to Bridgewater’s newest shoe company, however, was only indirectly related to these two intertwining considerations. About three

weeks after the dedicatory exercises heralded the factory’s completion, the cutters at White’s went on strike, demanding the same wages that the White Company had paid in Brockton. Almost every employee of the factory soon joined the strike, holding mass, but peaceful, meetings every morning for twelve days. Through the efforts of the Board of Trade of the Bridgewater Commercial Club, the two parties were brought together, and a settlement was reached with White’s agreeing to the wage scale demanded by Local 357 of the Boot and Shoe Workers’ Union. In early January of 1910, the company also agreed to use the union label, an issue that had plagued McElwain’s several years earlier. The L. Q. White Shoe Company would go on to become Bridgewater’s largest employer, but, as we now know, difficulties between labor and management would help end the company’s operations in Bridgewater in 1933.

Jenkins Bros. & Co. was another important segment of Bridgewater’s industrial scene during the early years of the new century. Realizing that the supply of leather would soon be outstripped by the population growth, George O. and Hiram H. Jenkins, two brothers of Whitman, formed a partnership in 1895, buying the old Hollingsworth paper mill on Plymouth Street in Prattown where, for over a century, the river had been used as a source of water power to promote industrial activity. After making extensive alterations to the old building, the new company, relying on water and coal as sources of power, began manufacturing leather board, a substitute for leather, using scrap leather and paper. This product was used for shoe soles and heels. From the beginning the business was on a sure footing, but the death of Hiram Jenkins in January 1902 necessitated a re-organization of the company. To settle his estate, a public auction was held in February 1904 to sell the Jenkins mill and its seventeen acres of land, needed as an area on which to dry the leather board in the summer. George O. Jenkins made a successful bid to buy the entire property. The firm, renamed The George O. Jenkins Co., carried on as usual, increasing production as the demand for its product rose. Jenkins continued to live in Whitman but, as the lists of taxpayers indicate, paid an increasing amount of taxes to Bridgewater in the early years of the twentieth century. While not an employer in the ranks of McElwain’s or the Stanley Works, this firm provided employment for perhaps fifty or so workers, a goodly number from the Prattown area. Many of the news items in the weekly Bridgewater Independent concerning this part of the town had to do with activities

67 BI, June 25, 1909; Tales Around the Common, p. 1.
and people associated with the Jenkins mill.⁶⁹

The last two years of the decade was a time of both success and tragedy for the firm. In early 1908, W. W. Parsons, the popular and respected superintendent for ten years, resigned and was presented with a handsome rocker. A month later, reflecting the general business conditions in Bridgewater, the Jenkins leather board factory was running day and night, providing work for two shifts of workers. Then, on a scorching Sunday in August a disastrous fire engulfed the mill. Despite the efforts of the fire department, under the control of the town since 1894, but still manned by volunteers and not yet motorized, the plant was completely destroyed. Adding insult to injury, Steamer No. 1 was knocked out of commission for three weeks when “a little nut was sucked into the machinery of the engine.” Shortly after the fire, Jenkins visited the scene, indicating that he knew no reason why he should not rebuild. A new factory was erected in 1909, and in January 1910 the fires were started under the boilers of the new Jenkins mill. By the end of that year new machinery was being installed, and Jenkins was trying out a Packard motor truck as means of getting his product to nearby towns, thus avoiding the more expensive freight charges of the railroad. The residents of Prattown must have been heartened by these developments and, furthermore, most likely were pleased when Jenkins’s son, H. Loring, a graduate of Worcester Polytechnic Institute, joined the company and set out to master every phase of the leather board business. Following the death of his father in 1916, he would become the treasurer and manager of the firm, while Robert A. Jenkins served as president.⁷⁰

While the shoe factories employed the largest number of workers in Bridgewater between 1901 and 1910, the iron and steel businesses were also very important to the economic well-being of the town. In the 1890’s, the Bridgewater Iron Works, which had played the major role in Bridgewater’s industrial development in the nineteenth century, was taken over by the Stanley Works of New Britain, Connecticut. The property at the High Street-Town River site consisted, at this point, of thirty buildings on fifteen acres

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of land. Riparian rights to the Town River and spur tracks to the nearby railroad added to the attractiveness of this location. While this Connecticut firm now owned the Bridgewater company, its production of iron parts, especially iron plate, for the Stanley factories in New Britain, was carried on under the aegis of the Bridgewater Foundry Machine and Rolling Mill Co. between 1899 and 1903. This arrangement is clearly seen in the lists of Bridgewater taxpayers, 1901-3, which cites this local firm not the Stanley Works as a contributor to the town’s tax coffers. The taxes were considerable, but nowhere near those paid by the Bridgewater Iron Works in its heyday some three decades earlier.  

Even before the company officially changed the name of its local branch in Bridgewater to the Stanley Works, there were signs of a revival of the town’s iron-steel industry. Two smokestacks were taken down in 1901 to make room for the installation of new engines. In July 1902, the foundry took pride in the completion of a “machine of unusual magnitude,” a two hundred ton borer, which was shipped in pieces to Pennsylvania. Over a year later sixty-five tons of hinge plate were rolled in one night shift, beating all previous records by almost twenty tons. Workers, some of whom had been employed by the old Bridgewater Irons Works, welcomed the increase in industrial activity since it provided them with a livelihood. But the possibility of being a victim of an industrial accident was ever present. One worker was severely burned in August 1902, when a piece of red hot steel got away from his tongs and wrapped around his legs, and another employee was badly injured a year later after falling from a ladder and then being drawn into some moving machinery. Sometimes a local doctor treated the injury, while in other cases the injured worker was taken to the Brockton Hospital.  

During these early years of the rejuvenation of the iron-steel industry at the High Street-Town River site, John M. Stetson, a well-known figure in the town, was the general manager of the Bridgewater Foundry, Machine & Rolling Mill Co. Family background, in part, had prepared him for this position. His grandfather, Nahum Stetson, had been a leading light in the Bridgewater Iron Works and had helped the company survive the nation’s financial panics of 1837 and 1857, and John’s father, George B., had

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also worked for the company. John’s own career at the Iron Works began as a clerk for his grandfather, which was followed by several other minor positions. He became the general manager of the Bridgewater Iron Company in 1888, after financial reverses had forced it into a trusteeship. When this iron enterprise was acquired by the Stanley Works, Stetson remained as manager, a position he was to hold until his untimely death from acute Bright’s disease on February 23, 1903. “Had he lived an hour and half longer,” the Bridgewater Independent reported, “he would have been fifty years of age.”

The death of John Mathewson Stetson was a great loss for the Town of Bridgewater. The following account from the Independent succinctly summarized his many business and civic contributions to the town and is illustrative of the class of men who were at the very center of Bridgewater’s civic and economic life in the early years of the twentieth century: “The deceased was a prominent man in everything connected with the improvement of Bridgewater. He was a director in the Bridgewater Savings Bank, Bridgewater Co-operative Bank, a member of the executive committee of the Bridgewater Shoe Factory Co., and the first president of the Commercial Club. He attended the Congregational Church. Fellowship Lodge, F. & A. M., Royal Arch Chapter, and Bay State Commandery. Knights of Honor had his name on their lists. He was at one time a selectman of the Town.” In addition, he loved animals and was a friend to many people in town. As expected, the iron works was closed the day of the funeral. Indicative of Stetson’s prominent role in the town, other industries and the stores also shut down during the time of the funeral, which was held at the Central Square Church, with its pastor, Reverend Charles Edward Stowe, conducting the service.

During most of 1903 the old Bridgewater iron works continued under the name used since 1899, but changes were imminent. In July, the Stanley Works of New Britain, Connecticut, appointed Charles Raymond Fitch as the new manager of its plant in Bridgewater, a position which he would hold for many years. Before coming to town Fitch had served in managerial positions in Hartford, Connecticut, making him well-qualified to take over what was still called the Bridgewater Foundry, Machine & Rolling Mill Co. He leased the elegant Herbert I. Conant House on Main Street, moving his family there in September. Located across from Trinity Episcopal Church, this house was built in the middle 1890’s and

72 BI, Jan. 24, July 18, Aug. 8, 1902, Aug. 28, Oct. 9, 23, 1903; Townscape Institute, Form 33, pp. 247-248.
73 BI, Feb. 27, 1903; Crane, pp. 820-821.
74 BI, Feb. 27, 1903.
is the town’s “only substantial high style Colonial Revival residence.” Whether or not he owned the first automobile in Bridgewater, as has been claimed, is opened to question, at least for this writer.75

What is not subject to doubt, however, were Fitch’s plans for the future direction of the local branch of the Stanley Works in Bridgewater. “We intend to develop this plant as fast as the business warrants,” he told the Bridgewater Independent, “and to obtain the maximum results from the facilities we have.” In particular, the work at the rolling mill and foundry, unlike in the past, would receive greater attention. There was no reason, he asserted, that the local plant could not roll steel “as cheaply and as well as it can be done anywhere.” The Stanley people, he went on to say, were “well satisfied with the location of the shops,” and thought there were sufficient buildings for the present. But some of the equipment was not modern and would “be changed as quickly as possible.” He also pointed out that even though all the output at the Bridgewater branch was being consumed by the Stanley Works, it was still “not sufficient to supply their need.” He envisioned the day when the local factory would not only amply supply the parent company, but also be able to “go into the open market for business.” And, in a prediction which would prove to be valid, he foresaw periodic increases in the number of workers at the Stanley Works in Bridgewater.76

The first major change in the local branch of the company under Fitch’s leadership came in late November 1903, when the name of the business was officially changed to “The Stanley Works.” In a symbolic move, the old iron works bell was replaced by a steam whistle, which was to be blown four times a day beginning at 6:50 a.m. As the new year opened, a sense of optimism was in the air. A night gang of seventy-five men was expected to be added to the one-hundred and seventy-five men already employed at the company. On February 9, 1904, a new record in steel rolling was made, prompting Fitch to pass out cigars to the workers. In keeping with the pledge to begin the process of improving the machinery, new gears were installed on the main and underground shafts in the billet mill. Another sign of the increase in production was clearly evident in the 1904 town tax list, which showed the company, newly named, paying considerably more taxes than it had in the years from 1899 to 1903. That the days of the old Bridgewater Iron Works had finally ended was poignantly brought home in August by a

75 BL, July 31, Aug. 7, 1903, Feb. 11, 1910, July 11, 1924; Townscape Institute, Form 104, pp. 281-282; “Fitch, Charles R.—Superintendent,” HH, p. 263.
76 BL, Aug. 7, 1903.
mammoth black and white sign reading “The Stanley Works,” which was painted on the railroad side of the company’s brick building.\textsuperscript{77}

From 1904 to 1910, the Stanley Works made considerable changes in Bridgewater’s steel and iron industry, adding another chapter to its long history. The first major improvement under Fitch’s superintendency was the rebuilding of the century-old dam at the High Street-Town River site in late August 1904. Rivers & Young of Holyoke, Massachusetts, was awarded the contract, and a gang of about twenty men was soon tearing down the old dam. Amazingly, its foundation was still solid with the old timbers that had not been exposed to the air as sound as the day they were put in. In keeping with the company’s policy of modernization, most of the dam was rebuilt in about six weeks, creating an up-to-date facility. While this work was going on, there was talk of demolishing the old water mill and replacing it with a small building in which a generator would convert all water power into electricity. By the fall of 1905, the Stanley Works in Bridgewater possessed “one of the finest water power plants” in the area. Some improvements in the local plant were the result of actions taken by the stockholders of the Connecticut-based company. In early 1908, they authorized an increase in capital stock from $1,500,000 to $3,000,000, an action that would have a positive impact on the firm’s facility in Bridgewater, even though its workforce was only a fraction of Stanley’s 3,000 employees. An improvement of a different nature was made at the Bridgewater facility in September 1910, when an addition to the office building doubled the company’s administrative space. The updating of the physical plant was only one indication of the Stanley Works’s advancement in Bridgewater. By 1910, this firm was the town’s biggest taxpayer, surpassing the Old Colony Street Railway Company, and could boast a payroll of 250, a figure considerably smaller than the number in the town’s shoe industry but, nonetheless, an important consideration in Bridgewater’s employment picture.\textsuperscript{78}

A few general points can be made about the Stanley workforce in Bridgewater between 1901 and 1910. Given the makeup of the town’s population, the Irish, English-Yankees, and Italians accounted for the better portion of the steelworkers in the early 1900’s, with some ethnic broadening of the workforce after 1905, as more immigrants from southern and southeastern Europe began to make their homes in

\textsuperscript{77} BI, Nov. 27, 1903, Jan. 15, Feb. 12, May 13, Aug. 12, 1904, Feb.11,1910.
Bridgewater Iron Works
(David R. Moore, Images of America: Bridgewater, p. 10)

Stanley Works
(David R. Moore, Images of America: Bridgewater, p. 10)
While the workers were better paid than they had been in the old iron industry, even taking in to account the cost-of-living increase, it was not an easy life for many of them. When business was booming in 1904 or 1909, for instances, employment was steady, but involved long hours. At other times, such as in 1907-1908, employment was threatened by poor nation-wide business conditions or by the weeks needed to install new machinery. Since a system of unemployment compensation was still in the future, no work meant no pay. The possibility of an industrial accident in this dangerous type of work always existed, as Cornelius Leary, employed in the night shift, discovered in late 1906.

Miraculously escaping instant death, he was, nonetheless, badly injured when his jacket was caught in a revolving shaft, and he was whirled around at a terrific speed before being hurled to the ground. Neither did steel workers at the Stanley Works have the benefits of unionization, a situation they had in common with other workers in this industry, following the failure of the Homestead Strike in 1892 against Andrew Carnegie’s firm in Pennsylvania. Some Stanley workers in Bridgewater lived in the vicinity of the company’s facilities on such streets as High and Wall and in Bolton Place, in some cases occupying mid-nineteenth century houses once owned by the Bridgewater Iron Company and lived in by its workers until this company began selling these dwellings in the late 1880’s. Starting in the 1890’s and increasingly so during the first decade of the twentieth century, the neighborhood around this steel manufacturing firm was referred to my many as Stanleyville, a name still used by some older citizens of Bridgewater.

The manufacturing of cotton gins, another industry with a long history in the town, continued to be carried on between 1901 and 1910 by the Bridgewater branch of the Continental Gin Company. Incorporated in 1899, this firm, part of a sweeping consolidation movement in American business between 1899 and 1902, was a rather loose combination of local plants in Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, Texas, and the one in Bridgewater, which previously had gone under the names of Bates, Hyde & Co. and Eagle Cotton Gin Co. To coordinate overall activities, officials from the company’s headquarters in Birmingham, Alabama, often paid visits to the local factories, including the Bridgewater one on Pearl

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Street. In turn, Samuel P. Gates and Ferdinand C. Gammons, treasurer and manager, respectively, of the Bridgewater plant, traveled southward by rail to discuss matters of special concern to their factory.\textsuperscript{80}

Both these men continued to be important contributors to the town’s industrial growth during the first decade of the twentieth century, sharing two things in common with a number of other leading manufacturers in Bridgewater. Neither were born here and their business by 1900 was part of an industrial conglomeration with facilities in more than one state. What set them apart from the managers of McElwain’s or the Stanley Works, however, was their long association with the town, both as residents and promoters of its economic growth.

Hailing from Ashby, Massachusetts, Samuel Pearly Gates, 1837-1914, first came to Bridgewater in 1856 to attend the Normal School, but withdrew from the institution a year and a half later. Shortly thereafter he modestly began his business career in Bridgewater by accepting a clerkship in Bates, Hyde & Company. After serving in the Civil War, he returned to his adopted town to resume his work at Hyde’s cotton gin business. He married Marcia E. Jackson in 1871, and their daughter was born two years later. Then tragedy struck when Gates lost both of them in the first half of 1873. They were buried in Mount Prospect Cemetery, administered by the Bridgewater Cemetery Association of which Gates was a trustee. After their deaths, Gates became more and more devoted to his work and a myriad of civic activities. Among other things, he was treasurer of the Bridgewater Savings Bank, a director in Bridgewaters Water Company, a leader in the Bridgewater Shoe Factory Company, president of the Bridgewater Co-operative Bank, a Trustee of the Bridgewater Library and the Bridgewater Academy, and a valued member of New Jerusalem Church. The cotton gin industry remained central to his life, however. By the late 1870’s, he was the treasurer of and had the controlling interest in the Eagle Cotton Gin Co., successor to the Bates and Hyde Company. His dominance in this business continued when it became part of the Continental conglomorate.\textsuperscript{81}

During most of these years of intense public activity, whether business or civic, Gates, who did


\textsuperscript{81} BI, Feb. 4, 1910; Townscape Institute, Form 32, pp. 127-128; “Gates, Samuel Pearly, 1837 to 1914—Manufacturer,” HH, pp. 264-265; Bridgewater Book, includes a good picture of Gates; Representative Men and Old Families of South-Eastern Massachusetts Containing Historical Sketches of Prominent and Representative Citizens and Genealogical Records of Many of the Old Families (Chicago: Beers, 1912), Vol. I, pp. 369-370.
not remarry, lived alone, except for his domestic help, in a large house “of all sorts of odd-shaped windows and gables” on School Street, which has been labeled by one writer as “the finest example of the Queen Anne style” of architecture in Bridgewater. While the house and grounds, including the stone wall surrounding the two acre property, were beautifully maintained, Gates’s life there must have been a lonely one. It was undoubtedly made happier when he had visits from close friends, business acquaintances, groups from New Jerusalem Church, and, especially, his sister, Mrs. Mary Shaw of Ashby. About forty years after the death of Gates, Louise Dickenson Rich admits to the possibility that her childhood memories of “Sam Gates” as an “ogre” who “did not view the young with tolerance,” might have been wrong, and perhaps he was simply a dignified man who was “just shy and misunderstood.” What she could not have known as such an early age was the prominent role that Samuel Pearly Gates played in the economic and civic life of Bridgewater for so many years, including his leadership in the town’s cotton gin industry.\(^{82}\)

Serving as manager and vice-president, Ferdinand C. Gammons, 1845-1929, was the other important leader of the Bridgewater component of the Continental Gin Company. He came to Bridgewater from Middleboro, an adjacent town, just after the Civil War. His marriage in 1874 to Abbie Lawrence, the founder of the Methodist Church in Bridgewater, proved to be a seminal point in his life since he soon shared his wife’s life-long commitment to that denomination’s faith and role in Bridgewater’s religious life. In the late 1870’s, at the urging of Gates, Gammons joined the Eagle Cotton Gin Company, thus commencing a pivotal managerial role in this business, which continued after this local company affiliated with the Continental combination.\(^{83}\)

Gammons must have been optimistic about his new business career since it was at this time that he and his wife bought a house, still extant, on South Street. Located immediately in back of the Bridgewater Academy, which had just started to be used as a public high school, the Gammons’s “new” home, with Queen Anne and Colonial Revival elements, had been built around 1850. In the early 1870’s it was owned by Francis D. King, who ran a livery stable to the rear of the Masonic Block in Central Square between 1865 and 1883. The Gammons occupied this dwelling for over fifty years, adding the

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\(^{83}\) BL, Feb. 4, 1910; “Gammons, Ferdinand C., 1845 to 1929—Manufacturer,” HH, p. 264; *Townscape Institute*, Form
corner tower and front porch in the early 1900’s. In this first decade of the new century, they continued to be central to Bridgewater’s Methodist community, which still worshipped in the small meetinghouse, formerly the home of the New Jerusalem Church, on Cedar Street. The cotton gin industry continued to provide a comfortable life for the Gammons, although as the tax lists indicate, they were not in the same financial league with Sam Gates who lived a short distance away. Perhaps Gammons was more than compensated by the joys of his wife’s company as they attended the annual meetings of the Continental Gin Company’s headquarters in Birmingham, Alabama, enjoyed their summer home on Cape Cod Bay, and, of course, as they collaborated in the work of the Methodist Church.  

All in all, the Continental Company in Bridgewater prospered under the leadership of Gates and Gammons between 1901 and 1910. Having the firm’s business office in the back part of the second floor of the Bank Building in Central Square was especially convenient for Gates, who also served as the treasurer of the Bridgewater Savings Banks which since 1872 had occupied the front part of the same floor. Continental’s tax assessment of over $1300 in 1910 placed it third as a contributor to the town’s revenue, a notch above its rank in 1900, but now considerably behind the Stanley Works. Taking advantage of its location at the end of Pearl Street near the railroad, the company shipped anywhere from three to nine cars of cotton gins a week during good times. Almost all of the gins produced in Bridgewater after 1900 were exported overseas to every cotton growing nation in the world. A shipment was even made in August of 1902 to Calcutta, India, where the British generally dominated the market. There were, of course, ups and downs in production, depending on certain factors. Summer usually was the busy time for the factory. It was reported in July 1901, for instance, that factory was “doing an immense business.” In the same month two years later fifty-five complete cotton gins were manufactured, “by far the greatest number ever produced in one week…” In the spring of 1905, on the other hand, work was light, “owing to over-production in the cotton mills.” By the fall of that year, however, the Fuller needle cotton gin with a device to prevent clogging began to be manufactured at the Bridgewater plant. Perhaps still feeling the effects of the brief national downturn in the economy in the fall of 1907, Continental said that full-time work would not be resumed until business conditions

212, pp. 499-500.

84 BI, Jan. 6, 1906, Jan. 3, 17, 1908, Jan. 21, Feb. 4, 1910, June 30, 1916; Townscape Institute, Form 212, pp. 499-500; see page 35 in my essay on stores and services in Bridgewater between 1900 and 1910 for more information.
warranted it. For the last two or three years of the decade, the Bridgewater factory had a workforce of about fifty men, which represented only half of its employment capacity. Nonetheless, following a visit to the Bridgewater plant in early 1910, officials from Birmingham reported “the outlook for the coming year very encouraging and the output of the company promises to be very large for several years to come.”

Most likely workers at the local factory took note of this optimistic forecast, but also thought about the conditions under which they labored. Early in the decade the men in the factory evidently had a high respect for A. Clinton Gammons, who had held the position of superintendent since the company was re-organized in 1899. They presented him “with a handsome roll top office desk” in December 1902, and in the following year at Christmas he found on his desk a “collection of smokers articles….“ Sometimes the giving was the other way as when an employee in 1906 was given a handsome watch at the conclusion of his service to the company. The workers certainly enjoyed their usual days off at Thanksgiving time and their regular Christmas vacation of two weeks. They also appreciated a certain flexibility on the part of management. On June 13, 1906, the factory closed to allow the employees to attend the anniversary celebration of the founding of the town in 1656. In May 1908, Gammons permitted the factory to operate on a Saturday so the workers could attend the Odd Fellows celebration in Taunton on the following Monday. Perhaps some in the plant found solace in knowing that the system of fire protection at the Continental works was “pronounced to be as nearly perfect as any in the section.”

The picture was not all rosy, however. The company had its share of work-related accidents during the decade. In 1903 there were at least three accidents involving planers or saws. Most likely the most serious problem for the workers was the unevenness of employment caused by business conditions over which they had no control. While the lack of work was always an ominous possibility, the biggest complaint of the men at the Bridgewater factory of the Continental firm was management’s unwillingness to limit the working day to nine hours during boom times. This issue almost led to a strike in June 1907, when the employees, who were not unionized, set a deadline for their demand to be met. A compromise

on F. D. King

85 BL, Jan. 18, Feb. 1, April 12, May 17, July 26, Aug. 2, 23, 1901, Aug. 15, 22, 1902, April 16, June 26, July 24, 1903, March 4, Nov. 25, 1904, March 10, April 28, Oct. 6, 1905, March 20, May 1, Nov. 6, 1908, Jan. 21, Feb. 4, 11, Aug. 12, 1910.

was reached, but the whole episode indicated that harmony between labor and capital, even in a small factory like Continental in the small town of Bridgewater, was not simply a matter of workers relying on the paternalistic benevolence of management or in a false sense of community between labor and capital.87

The Henry Perkins Co., officially incorporated in 1902, but still called the Perkins Foundry by many of the town’s inhabitants, continued to be an important part of Bridgewater’s industrial scene in the first decade of the twentieth century, retaining its distinction as the oldest family-run industry in Bridgewater. But there was a change in leadership. In 1901, Henry Perkins, who founded the business in 1848, passed away in his middle eighties. His widow Amelia, as the family had done since the 1850’s, continued to live for a number of years in the fine house with its large attractive front yard and “cupola topped stable” on the corner of Main and Oak Streets. Ralph, one of the Perkins’s four sons, who was “identified” with this family “concern all his active life,” became its new president. The business remained at its Broad Street site across the railroad tracks from the Continental Gin Company, which had absorbed the Eagle Cotton Gin Company in 1899.88

In general the Perkins enterprise prospered between 1901 and 1910, but did have some setbacks. Its contributions to Bridgewater’s tax revenues remained fairly steady, averaging around $300 or so a year. As weekly railroad shipment reports of the early twentieth century indicate, the firm continued to take advantage of the nearby railroad to transport its castings, nails, and machines to its customers. In February 1903, for example, a newly patented tack machine weighing several tons was shipped to the American Steel and Wire Company located in Philadelphia. Perkins products were also involved in foreign trade. After investigating a large number of machines manufactured in the United States, an Australian buyer in 1910 purchased nine of the company’s horse-nail machines. One of the enterprise’s important business associations came to an end in 1908, however. In that year, the American Piano Company decided to move the Chickering piano plant to New York State, thus ending fifty-six years of

87 BI, July 26, 1901, Aug. 8, 15, Dec. 19, 1902, June 19, Sept. 25, 1903, May 31, June 14, 21, 1907.
ordering piano plate castings from the Perkins foundry.  

The company also had its share of fires in this decade. While none them were anywhere near the proportions of the McElwain fire of 1898 or the Jenkins fire of 1908, they necessitated some of the improvements Perkins firm carried out during these years. A fire in July 1901 required repairs to the cupola and the slate roof of the building that dated back to the end of the Civil War. Important from a safety point of view, the blowpipe was moved underground, two new tuyeres (nozzles through which air is conducted in to the furnace) were installed, and the furnace relined. A year later a new and larger cupola was erected in the old foundry. Indicative of good times, the old wire mill was also remodeled in 1902 into another foundry to be used during the busy season. A new stack was erected in September, and both the old and new foundries were now running to their full capacity. Early in the following year new sheds were erected to receive seventy-five tons of soft coal, the source of the company’s energy. A fire in April 1904 fortunately did little damage, but was a reminder of the danger of sparks from a cupola. In the spring of 1910, a third fire destroyed one of the company’s building, which had been used by the Le Baron Foundry Co. since October 1908. When it was decided not to replace this facility, E. L. Le Baron, owner of the business, decided to move his operations to Brockton where he had been purchasing most of his scrap iron. The Perkins machine shop, however, was doing a brisk business at this time, even operating three evenings for a number of weeks.

My initial research on the workforce of the Perkins foundry and machine shop in the early 1900’s has not produced a plethora of information, but some observations can be made. It would seem that the business provided employment for at least thirty or so men. A fair portion of them were Irish, if the names of fellow employees who were chosen to serve as pall bearers at William Murphy’s funeral in September 1905 are any indication. James O’Brien, surely an Irish name, was in charge of the fine clambake, which was attended by thirty or so employees in Lakeville in early August 1904. There was a certain comradely rivalry among the workers of the foundry and those of the machine shop, which especially surfaced when they clashed in games of baseball on Saturday afternoons, played most likely on

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89 BI, Jan. 4, April 12, 1901, May 2, 1902, Feb. 27, March 13, 1903, March 4, Aug. 5, 1904, Aug. 27, 1909, April 1, Aug. 12, 1910.

the South Field on Grove Street. The rosters of the two teams reveal a more ethnically diverse workforce than was perhaps suggested above. Work at any foundry, of course, was not without its dangers. Serious burns from molten metal, requiring treatment from local doctors, occurred more than once at the Perkins foundry during this decade. And, as was the case in other town industries, slack work meant unemployment as some workers discovered in March 1905. But all in all, these were good years for the Henry Perkins Co. in Bridgewater. (One wonders if anyone in the firm had any predilection that one hundred years later it would still be operating as a family business at the same location.)

The Miller tack and nail factory, a frame building measuring about one hundred by thirty feet, on Hale Street was another segment of Bridgewater’s industrial complex in the early twentieth century. Under the direct management of Henry J. Miller, founder and owner of the company, this family business had thrived throughout the 1890’s. The town was shocked and saddened to hear of his premature and violent death at the age of fifty-four, after being “thrown from express wagon” early in 1901. His passing, lamented the Independent, deprived the town of an “ardent worker” for the well-being of the community. Fortunately for the Miller enterprise and its employees, two of his sons were able to step in to operate the business, which was soon conducted under the name of Henry J. Miller’s Sons. At the time of his father’s death, Arthur C. Miller, a graduate of the Bryant-Stratton business college, had been working for the company for five years. In 1904, his brother Chester F. also joined the business immediately after finishing a four-year course at the Bridgewater Normal. Around 1908, the responsibility of running the enterprise fell on him when his brother Arthur was afflicted with a health problem that deprived him the use of his legs. His sister Louise attended Arthur, was a constant companion to their aging mother Katherine, managed the family home on Broad Street, and acted as the bookkeeper for the family business. Her untimely death in 1912, caused by Bright’s disease, was the third tragedy to hit the family in little more than a decade. She was buried in the Center Street cemetery of St. Thomas Aquinas, Bridgewater’s only Catholic Church.

Between 1901 and 1910 the firm generally flourished with its tax contribution to the town

91 BL, Feb. 18, Aug. 12, 1904, March 17, Sept. 8, 1905, June 28, Oct. 4, 1907.
92 BL, Feb. 1, 1901, Feb. 1, 1904, March 25, 1910, Aug. 9, 1912, Oct. 15, 1915, March 1, Dec. 27, 1918; it might be noted that Arthur C. died in 1915 at the age of thirty-seven and that a third son Henry T. (Harry), a graduate of Bridgewater Normal who became connected to a business in Boston, died in 1918 at the family home on Broad Street, Bridgewater, at the age of thirty-six.
generally hovering around $200. What had started out as a shoe tack and nail factory was producing by 1910 an extensive line of hardware goods. Much of the firm’s output was shipped to large handlers in New York and Pennsylvania, made possible by the factory’s location along the railroad tracks.

Beginning in 1905, the old-fashioned Swedish charcoal-burned iron shingle nail, known for its durability compared to a steel nail, was one of Miller’s products that sold far and wide to all classes of dealers. Another source of the firm’s income derived from subletting contracts for the manufacture of wire nail machinery since it owned patents and drawings for this equipment. Buying plants of financially-strapped competitors and then selling the machinery as secondhand to other concerns also proved profitable. In October 1903, Miller’s increased its own equipment by buying the entire plant of Benson Manufacturing Company of Providence, Rhode Island. Another sign of the firm’s prosperity was the further physical enlargement of the factory on Hale Street in 1901-02. Adding to what had already become a two-story structure, a brick boil house, a new wing on the eastern side of the tack factory, and the doubling of the floor space being rented at the time to the W. B. May slipper company were included in this new expansion.

The workforce of the Miller company varied in size, but was never very large. In October 1901, according to one account, the firm had one hundred machines in operation and employed about twenty-five hands, placing it, nevertheless, among the largest tack manufacturers in the United States. Nine years later the plant employed only about fifteen men and girls (factory girls was then common terminology) most likely because the factory at this time was producing only one and one-half tons of tacks a day compared to its daily capacity of two and one-half tons. Although on a much smaller scale than the larger factories in town, Miller’s tack enterprise was not exempt from industrial accidents, such as the one in August 1903 in which a worker’s hand was caught under a drill and almost severed at the wrist. Workers were also subject to temporary layoffs when machines needed to be repaired or economic conditions reduced the need for labor. If one were sensitive to noise, Miller’s was not the place to work since the machines could “drive you nearly crazy with the incessant rattle and awful racket.”

The making of bricks, not a new endeavor in Bridgewater, was carried on by three companies during the years from 1901 to 1910. In November of 1900, George M. Hooper, who traced the origins of

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his company back to 1830 or so, had announced its absorption by New England Brick Company, a big combine in the process of taking over control of the large brick yards in the six state region. For the next ten years, the Hooper business, operating as a part of this consolidation, continued to manufacture bricks at its original location between Plymouth Street and the Town River. If its taxes to the town and railroad shipments are considered, it would appear that the firm did a steady business, but showed little expansion during this decade. In 1908-09, the town was saddened to hear of the deaths of two men associated with this brickyard. Afflicted with tuberculosis, Louis Forcier, who had served as the yard’s superintendent, died at the age of 41, after spending some time at the Millet sanitarium in East Bridgewater. Described as “a man of sterling worth,” he was buried in the Catholic cemetery in back of St. Thomas Aquinas Church. A little more than a year later, George M. Hooper, who had been involved in the company since 1859 and had served as its president beginning in 1886, passed away. Following his funeral service at the New Jerusalem Church, he was buried in Mt. Prospect Cemetery. Not only had he succeeded in his business career, but had contributed greatly to the town’s civic well-being, serving as a Library Trustee, Chairman of the School Committee, and Representative to the General Court from 1880 to 1890. As a testimony to his important role in town affairs, the pallbearers at Hooper’s funeral were Samuel P. Gates, Joshua Crane, Jr., Austin Turner, and Edward A. Hewett, all important figures in the life of Bridgewater and personal friends of the deceased. Two years after Hooper’s death and over eighty years after the founding of this enterprise by his father Mitchell, bricks ceased to be made at this old yard.\footnote{BI, July 19, 1901, Aug. 7, 1903, Oct. 6, 1905, March 25, 1910. BI, Aug. 8, 1902, Aug. 5, 1904, April 24,1908, July 9, 30, Aug. 27, 1909, Aug. 12, 1910, May 4, 1917; Townscape Institute, Form 185, pp. 440-441, Form 186, pp. 442-443; Tales Around the Common, p. 28; “Hooper, George M, 1838 to 1909--Manufacturer,” HH, p. 266; Amos R. Eisenhaur purchased the New England Brick Company’s property on Plymouth Street in 1917 and cut it up into building lots.}

Compared to the Hooper enterprise, the E. L. Cook Brick Company, established in 1890, was a relatively new addition to Bridgewater’s industrial base in 1901. But, unlike its older competitor, Cook’s grew and prospered in the first decade of the twentieth century, until by 1910 its town tax increased to over $500. Situated on Cook Street just south of the Titicut railroad station on what was then known as the State Farm at Bridgewater, the firm’s yards spread over forty acres and included two modern plants, kilns, sheds, and the clay banks of the Taunton River. In May of 1905, the firm installed a steam shovel to use in its yard. Relying on wood and coal, the company had the capacity of manufacturing almost
twenty million bricks a year and was capable of shipping one hundred and fifty thousand bricks a day by using the nearby railroad. One of the few brick manufacturers in the country with a registered Trade Mark, its highly durable “Diamond C” brick was used in the construction of a number of public and private buildings in Massachusetts cities, such as Fall River, New Bedford, Plymouth, and Cambridge and in Providence, Rhode Island. Cook’s reputation as a modern brick-making enterprise was further affirmed in 1910 when a new and complete electric power plant was ready for use. Cook was married to Georgianna Wrisley of Titicut who served as the firm’s president and went on a trip west with her husband in February 1908 to promote the company’s business. By 1910, the area occupied by Cook’s brickyard was a far cry from the property in 1890, which had been “as wild and overgrown as the wilds of Africa…”

Although more research on Cook’s labor force is needed, several interesting things might be pointed out. Around 1910 the yard had about one hundred workers, most of whom were Portuguese and Poles (we would say Polish today). In some degree this ethnic makeup was a reflection of the changing population of the town as it began to receive more immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. One source avers that these workers were employed “at good wages,” but more data and analysis are necessary on this point. Since the business was equipped to operate in the summer and winter, many of the workers found steady employment, ranging from eight to twelve months. The heads of the fifteen families with houses on the property generally were the best off when it came to steady work. Some of the other hands boarded with these families, a practice that was not uncommon in industrial America at this time. To accommodate thirty to forty laborers the company also had a boarding house which, after 1903, was evidently moved to Cook Street within easy walking distance to the brickyard.

In the Spring of 1901, Cook’s and Hooper’s (The New England Brick Company) were joined by a third brick manufacturer. Known as the Bridgewater Brick Company, this new enterprise was located on the grounds of the old Plymouth County Agricultural Society off of Broad Street along the Town

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97 BI, Feb. 25, 1910; Bridgewater Book; Census of Massachusetts, 1905, Vol. I, p. 335; “Population,” United States
River. “What a transformation from the realm of communication with Bachus…to commercialism…,” commented one observer in 1910. The beginning of this change began in the middle of the 1890’s. Plagued by a number of problems and the realization that the Bridgewater fair could not compete with those held in the larger communities of Taunton and Brockton, the trustees of the agricultural society sold its sixty acres of land and buildings to J. Gardner Bassett and Calvin Estes, well-known businessmen in the town. As late as 1898, perhaps out of habit, a fair was held on these grounds, and the Plymouth County Agricultural Society continued to function despite the loss of its home-base in Bridgewater. For a very short time after the fire of 1898, the McElwain Shoe Company, waiting for the completion of the new factory on Perkins Street, carried on its shoe business in the vacated Exhibition Hall on the fair grounds. In addition, the Bassett and Estes had much of the land cleared, and quite a portion of the grounds was put under cultivation. Perhaps it was almost inevitable as the new century began that the location of this scenic area was earmarked for even greater commercial development. Situated fairly near the town’s center, this property had the advantages of being close to railroad facilities and a water supply from the Town River.98

The move to make greater commercial use of this area began early in 1901. A business interest in New York State, contemplating the creation of a brick yard, accepted an invitation from Fred W. Hooper, evidently Basset’s agent, to inspect the old Fair Grounds as a possible site for such an undertaking. Borings were made, but failure to agree on the price of the property caused a deal to fall through. At this point, Bassett asked Hooper to continue examining the site for possible clay deposits. It was soon apparent that a layer of nine to twenty feet of clay underlay the area. Moving with dispatch, Bassett bought out Estes’s interest in the property, formed The Bridgewater Brick Company, and put Hooper in charge of creating a brickyard. Although there was a bit of concern in the town over the aesthetic loss of such a beautiful spot, including the stripping of the trees from the site, and the possible negative impact on the town’s water supply, work began on the project in late April.99

For the reader wishing to follow in some detail all the steps involved in the construction of the Bridgewater Brick Yard in 1901 by J. H. Ball’s building company, there is no better source than the

98 BI, May 3, 1901, Feb. 25, 1910, June 1, 1910, June 1, 1917.
99 BI, April 26, May 3, 1901.
**Bridgewater Independent.** Tearing down many fair ground buildings, clearing the land of trees by Canadian workers, erecting a kiln shed, equipping the old Agricultural Exhibition Hall with heat and power, installing modern machinery, laying new water pipes, constructing a pallet yard as a place to dry bricks, creating a large coal bin, and many other aspects of the undertaking were dutifully reported by this local newspaper. Despite some minor snags and delays, bricks with the initials “B.B.C.” began to be manufactured by the middle of August. In early September, A. J. Elwell placed the first order, a few thousand bricks to be used in the construction of an addition to his block on the east side of Central Square. By late November, the Bridgewater Brick Company had already shipped more than half a million bricks to various places, placing it among the town’s largest users of the railroad. If predictions that the yard could produce ten million bricks annually for the next fifty years seemed overly optimistic, there was no doubt that Bassett’s enterprise became an important player in the town’s economy in the early 1900’s.\(^{100}\)

This new addition to Bridgewater’s brick industry soon surpassed the New England Brick Company, which was located nearby, in production figures, taxes paid to the town, and railroad shipments. As originally planned, the Bridgewater Brick Company expanded in the second year so that its facilities covered three acres of land. Three years later, after getting permission from the Bridgewater selectmen and Plymouth County commissioners, the business, now under the energetic management of Bassett’s son William H., constructed a spur track from the brick yard to the N. Y., N. H. & H. R. R., located a half mile to the south. This project involved laying tracks across a newly-built bridge, which spanned a part of the Town River, and Spring Street, making it easy to bring coal directly to the yard and bricks from the kilns to the near-by railroad for shipment to such Massachusetts cities as Boston, Brockton, Fall River, and New Bedford, and Providence, Rhode Island. Another sign of J. Gardner Bassett’s entrepreneurship was his conversion of the Agricultural Exhibition Hall into a factory of four floors in 1907. Its first occupants were May’s slipper and Derby’s shoe businesses. In the Spring of 1909, Bassett began to use power from the Edison Electric Company to manufacture bricks. By this time, the Bridgewater Brick Company was one of New England’s leaders in this field, taking pride in its

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\(^{100}\) BI, April 26, May 10, 17, June 14, July 12, 26, Aug. 9, 16, 30, Sept. 6, 13, Nov. 22, Dec. 27, 1901.
1909 production figure of twenty million bricks.\textsuperscript{101}

A few general points can be made about Bassett’s workforce. It was not large, numbering between thirty and fifty during the first decade. Some French-Canadians, who constituted only a very small part of the town’s population in the early 1900’s, found employment in this enterprise, having, in some cases, been hired originally to clear the land. One of the few reported industrial accidents at the Bridgewater yard involved a French-Canadian who was badly injured in 1904 by a mass of falling clay. The company sought to mitigate the seasonal nature of the work by constructing a facility that allowed for the continuous manufacturing of bricks except during the most extreme weather conditions and by keeping some of the men employed in chopping and stacking wood during the winter months. Winter layoffs were not uncommon, however. It would appear that Bassett’s approach to the labor issue was somewhat paternalistic, not uncommon among Bridgewater’s (and the nation’s) industrialists at the time. The workers at the yard were not unionized, but the company did provide some amenities, including an up-to-date kitchen and a large wash room. And, about a month before the start of production, J. H. Ball, the project’s contractor, began work on a twelve-unit tenement house, located south of the big shed, to house a number of workers and their families.\textsuperscript{102}

While clashes between labor and capital certainly occurred on some level in all of the industrial undertakings in Bridgewater in the early twentieth century, the most prominent one at the Bridgewater Brick Company was not directly related to its employees. The company contracted with Ball not only to construct the original yard, but also the 1902 additions. In the spring of that year the physical expansion of the company was threatened, however, when nine carpenters in the employ of Ball went on strike over his refusal to grant an eight-hour day; he argued that his contract with Bassett could not accommodate this demand. Just a few weeks before this action, the carpenters of Bridgewater had formed a union, begun holding monthly meetings in Masonic Hall, and started associating with similar carpenters’ organizations in surrounding communities such as Brockton, Taunton, and Whitman. These skilled craftsmen hoped that by forming “fraternal” associations they could determine “the manner and pace of their jobs.”

\textsuperscript{101} BI, Dec. 27, 1901, March 28, April 18, July 11, 18, Aug. 22, Sept. 5, Oct. 3, 1902, April 16, Aug. 28, 1903, March 4, Aug. 5, Nov. 11, 18, 25, 1904, Jan. 13, March 3, April 7, 1905, May 3, 1907, Feb. 25, April 8, 1910; the Derby Shoe Company took over the converted Agricultural Exhibition Hall and the plant that supplied it with power.

\textsuperscript{102} Census of Massachusetts, 1905, Vol. I, p. 335; this census reported that 165 French Canadians lived in Bridgewater in 1905; BI, April 26, May 3, 10, July 12, Aug. 9, 1901, Aug. 5, 1904, April 10, 1910.
Bridgewater carpenters did not gain the eight-hour day at this juncture, unlike the painters in town, but continued the fight. In 1906, the majority of contractors in Bridgewater and surrounding areas did agree to a wage scale of three dollars a day for carpenters, something for which local carpenters’ unions, including Bridgewater’s, had worked.103

While the manufacturing of shoes, iron and steel products, and bricks dominated Bridgewater’s industrial scene in the first decade of the twentieth century, there were other businesses, mostly small, which contributed to the town’s economic well-being. One of the more important ones was the Eastern Grain Company at the juncture of Plymouth Street and the east side of the railroad tracks. Founded in the late 1890’s, this grain supplier began operations in 1900 under the direction of Walter S. Little, J. Gardner Bassett, and Hosea Kingman. Little became the sole owner of the business in 1902, by which time Kingman had passed away and Bassett’s brickyard was in its second year. A native of Bridgewater and a graduate of Comer’s Commercial School in Boston, Little had been the bookkeeper for the Bridgewater Box Company from 1891 to 1896. His marriage in September of 1902 to Flora Townsend would prove to be a fortuitous event for their native town. For over sixty years, each contributed, sometimes in different ways, to Bridgewater’s progress. As a business and civic leader, Little headed his own business for forty years and was associated with the Bridgewater Savings Bank and the Bridgewater Trust Company. For eight years he served as moderator of town meetings. Flora T. Little was equally active as an artist, teacher, and leader in such organizations as the Ousamequin Club and the Bridgewater Improvement Association. Later in the century, bequeaths from the Little estate would greatly benefit the town, allowing it to build a new public library and further its beautification through the efforts of the Bridgewater Improvement Association.104

Little’s grain business generally showed steady growth between 1902 and 1910 but, as the tax lists show, it was not in the same economic league as larger companies, such as McElwain’s, Stanley Works, Continental Gin, White’s, or Bassett’s brickyard. The company advertised itself as “wholesale and retail dealers in grass, hay, straw, tile pipe…” and agents for companies that manufactured dairy feed

EASTERN
GRAIN COMPANY
BRIDGEWATER, MASSACHUSETTS

— Manufacturers of Wirthmore Feeds —

Eastern Grain Company
(Old Bridgewater Tercentenary)
and farm implements. A spur track to the nearby railroad gave it access to Western grains, which could be stored in its grain elevator. In April 1904, for example, a railroad car containing 2,340 bushels of oats arrived at the company’s facilities. The rail transportation system and a large horse-drawn delivery wagon permitted the firm to supply bags of grain feed to its out-of-town and local customers. In 1904-05, more storage space was constructed to accommodate the increase in business. By 1908, the Littles, in their thirties and evidently feeling confident about their economic future, made the decision to build a new house.\textsuperscript{105}

The site they chose was not far from the corner of Summer Street and Park Avenue and where for over a century and half the so-called Shaw House had stood. This latter dwelling had taken its name from Reverend John Shaw, the second minister of the First Parish, who succeeded Reverend Benjamin Allen in 1731. Shaw moved into his newly-built house in 1740 and, from the beginning, also used it as a school to prepare boys and young men for college, especially Harvard and Brown. As late as 1884, Joshua E. Crane wrote that this dwelling, the home of five Shaw generations, was “still in good repair” and “should be preserved as a memorial of its honored builder.” This was not to be, and in 1904 the house was torn down. The Littles bought the site and in 1908-1909 constructed their house, which still stands at Fifteen Plymouth Street. In her unpublished memoirs, “Wreath of Memories,” Flora Little discussed the plan of the house, pointing out that it was erected at a time when the “vogue of a tiled roof on a house of concrete was beginning.” For over fifty years, this couple was to live here, filling it with many artistic treasures acquired in their extensive travels. In the spring of 1910, however, a matter of more immediate concern occupied the time and energy of Walter S. Little.\textsuperscript{106}

On the night of May 12, 1910, a fire, “hotter than blazes,” destroyed a good portion of the Eastern Grain Company, including the grain elevator and thousands of bushels of grain that had been recently received at the company. It was difficult to pinpoint the cause of the fire, which resulted in a loss that totaled between thirty-five and fifty thousand dollars, a considerable amount of money in those days. The volunteer and non-motorized Fire Department responded to the fire, but several factors

\textsuperscript{105} BI, March 9, 1900, April 12, 1901, Aug. 22, 1902, May 27, 1904, June 30, 1905, Aug. 27, 1909, Aug. 12, 1910; Arthur C. Lord, “First Quarter of the Century in Bridgewater,” Tales Around the Common, p. 45; Bridgewater Book.

\textsuperscript{106} BI, April 29, May 20, 27, July 22, 1904, Oct. 23, 1908; Flora T. Little, “Wreath of Memories;” Crane, p. 819; D. Moore, Images of America: Bridgewater, p. 93; this source has an excellent photograph of the Little House which was
impeded the prompt extinguishing of the blaze, including a delay in the arrival of the main engine. Little, nevertheless, publicly praised the fire fighters, thanking them for “saving the large sheds adjoining and near the elevator” and for “removing valuables to places of safety.” The Bridgewater Independent used the occasion to remind the town that not enough men were willing to serve as volunteer firefighters, who, the newspaper pointed out, “place themselves in danger of loss of limb and life…. Using the untouched sheds and unaffected bushels of grain, the company immediately began to fill some of its orders; even the grain ruined by the fire was used for fertilizer. Of greater and long-ranged import was Little’s decision to rebuild a larger and more modern plant, which would include up-to-date “roller mills, cleaning machines, automatic scales, and unloading machinery capable of moving 1000 bushels an hour.” By the middle of July work began, with the prediction that it would result in “the largest and most modern [plant] in this section of the state.” This Grain business was to have years ahead of it. ¹⁰⁷

The Shawmut White Lead Co. was another industrial enterprise in the late 1890’s with high hopes of becoming a vital part of the town’s industrial economy but, unlike Eastern Grain, was not destined to have a long life in Bridgewater. After moving to the Spring Street factory in 1897, the Shawmut firm spent four years repairing and rebuilding its part of the premise in preparation for the production of white lead, a product used mainly in exterior paints. Despite one snag after another that delayed the start of operations, the company’s worth must have been considerable if its taxes paid to the town from 1900 to 1903 are taken into consideration. By early 1901, work at its factory began, at least, on a part time basis. But within two years the Shawmut firm ceased operations and, after several postponements, was sold at auction in May 1903 for a little over $25,000 to George D. Coleman of Boston, a former owner of the plant. He hired J. H. Ball, a well-known contractor in town, to re-roof the main factory building. It was not until May of 1910 that Shawmut’s machinery was sold to a buyer in Salem, Massachusetts, and removed from the Spring Street factory. Before that time, there had been talk in 1907 that a new enterprise specializing in the manufacture of a device for compressing air power had plans to occupy part of this old structure, but apparently nothing came of this. It does seem probable, however, that the Aabaco Surfacing Co. made use of this factory for a while. What we are sure of is that the Bridgewater Shoe Corporation bought the property in 1915 and added a third floor to the structure.

¹⁰⁷ built in 1908-1909, not 1913 as stated under the photograph.
A discussion of Bridgewater’s industries during the first decade of twentieth century would not be complete without briefly mentioning ice cutting, wood sawing, and cigar making. Before modern refrigeration, it was vital in the northern part of the United States to harvest an ice crop in the winter and store it for the coming summer. Bridgewater was no exception to this practice. Unpredictable weather patterns made this business rather precarious at times, however. The early months of 1900 in Bridgewater, for instance, were unseasonably warm to the extent that the lack of ice raised serious concerns in the town, and there was talk about “an ice famine.” In early spring, the company run by H. A. Wilber notified its Bridgewater patrons that it had received eighteen cars of ice from the north, “enough to supply all customers.” But, of course, imported ice was more expensive than ice secured in the town. The situation improved for local companies in December of 1900, when cold weather produced an early ice crop at Lake Nippenicket just before Christmas. This up and down pattern continued throughout the decade, with 1901, 1903, 1907, and 1910 having very good ice seasons and 1906 producing a crop described as “worse than inadequate…” Suggestions of how to cope with the situation in this latter year ranged from establishing an artificial ice plant in this part of the state to asking consumers to be less “extravagant and self indulgent” in their use of ice.

Carver Pond, located off Summer Street, was the most important source of the town’s ice supply. It was a pleasant enough pastime on a winter day to take a short walk from the Common and spend some time watching the ice being cut and conveyed to an ice house, where it was covered with hay or sawdust. The first McNeeland facility on this pond was built around 1905, and in 1909 Frederick McNeeland enlarged the enterprise by establishing the Bridgewater Ice and Coal Company, with its business office located on Plymouth Street, near the east side of the railroad tracks. Early in 1910, he had forty-five men harvesting ice, making his commercial endeavor the largest of its kind in Bridgewater. But there were others engaged in harvesting ice. Among them were: L. W. Carly’s on Carver Pond, A. I. Simmons’s on

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Bridgewater Ice and Coal Company (McNeeland's)
(Pictorial History, 1987, p. 61.)
North Street, George Chishom’s on South Street, George A. Alcott’s on Swift Avenue, the Town Farm’s between South and Bedford Street, O. B. Cole’s at Mosquito Mill Pond, and the Normal School’s on Boyden Pond. There was an awareness that any water supply used to make ice should not be polluted. George Chisholm was undoubtedly pleased to get word in February 1901 that the water from his pond on South Street passed examination and that he could proceed to harvest ice. The Bridgewater Village Improvement Society, formed in 1901, voiced its apprehensions about the possible contamination of those ponds which received run-off water from the town dump, where some citizens were in the habit of depositing animal waste matter. To alleviate this problem and others, this organization successfully led a drive to establish a new public town dump further south on Bedford Street. The ice industry in Bridgewater, as in other places, slowly gave way to modern refrigeration, but many citizens, well into the twentieth century, continued to rely on ice to keep their food supplies fresh. Even this “youthful” writer has some faint memories of an ice box being supplied weekly in the early 1940’s with a new block of ice.¹¹⁰

With extensive stands of pine and oak trees, it is not surprising that saw mills played a role in the economy of Bridgewater from its beginning and continued to do so from 1900 to 1910. In 1667, eleven years after the town’s incorporation, Robert Latham built a mill on the Satucket River in what would become East Bridgewater, and in the eighteenth century a number of such enterprises were found in several places in the South Parish, the Bridgewater of today. In 1727, John Washburn bought from Enoch and Ephrain Leonard some shares of a saw mill on the South Brook, and in the 1730’s there was a mill in Titicut, an area which was on the verge of separating from the South Parish. In the following century we read about saw mills at Carver Pond and in Prattown. Statistics prepared at the time of the bicentennial celebration in 1856, cite the preparation of 900,000 feet of lumber with a value of $7,600, and thirty employees. In short, activities of this type of enterprise started with the founding of Bridgewater and by the start of the twentieth century had been carried on for almost two and a half

In the early 1900’s, it appears that there were three saw-mill businesses in Bridgewater. Thanks to a picture in the 1987 Pictorial History, prepared by the Bridgewater Historical Collectors, it would seem that one of them operated on the river in Prattown, a site long associated with this type of enterprise. A second one was King’s Mill on Flagg Street, owned by Gilbert O. King, a farmer and cattle dealer who lived nearby on Summer Street and was active in the Plymouth County Agricultural Society. His tombstone in Hillside Cemetery on Auburn Street is marked by a man and yoke of oxen; it was written at the time of his death in 1924 that he was one of the few farmers who had retained the use of oxen on his farm and lumbering business. My research has not yet revealed whether or not he made use of the nearby railroad, but the location of his mill near this mode of transportation did not always work to his advantage. In 1905, sparks from a passing locomotive caused a fire at his mill. Fortunately, little damage was done, thanks to “a very quick hitch” of the town’s fire apparatus which reached the scene in twenty minutes.\footnote{112}

The Gammons Saw Mill, often called the Magnolia Saw mill, was a more substantial enterprise than the other two. Located on Summer Street near the entrance to Carver Pond, a partly man-made body of water mainly fed by the South Brook, the Gammons enterprise was the last of a long string of small manufacturing endeavors that had operated in the area for almost two centuries. When Ferdinand C. Gammons, associated with the cotton gin business in town, and Elijah B. Gammons, known as a “wood turner,” bought the property, they replaced a burned-out building with a new one to house a box board saw mill business. They came to rely on steam rather than water power since Carver Pond was becoming filled with mud. The business continued to operate successfully throughout the decade, closing in the summer and starting up again in the fall.\footnote{113}

But in 1906, the Gammons came under some criticism when they decided to drain the pond.

\footnote{111} BI, Oct. 28, 1887, April 18, 1906; this source gives a detailed account of the changes in ownership and use of the Carver Pond area; HH, p. 35; I found in the files of the Bridgewater Public Library a handwritten list of saw mills that existed in the first half of the eighteenth century.\footnote{112} BI, May 25, 1900, Nov. 29, 1901, Nov. 28, 1902, April 24, 1903, March 25, 1904, May 12, 1905, June 13, 1924; Pictorial History, 1987, p. 58; “King, Gilbert--Farmer,” HH, p. 268.\footnote{113} BI, April 13, 1900, March 8, 1901, Dec. 26, 1902, Feb. 20, July 17, Nov. 6, 1903, Oct. 7, 1904, Oct. 27, 1905, March 30, April 18, July 20, 27, 1906, June 7, 1907, April 8, 1910; Townscape Institute, Form 133, pp. 339-340; Lord, “First Quarter of the Century in Bridgewater,” Tales Around the Common, p. 44; K. Moore, “Four Legged Tree,” Tales Around the Common, p. 3; Moore points out that before one came to the Gammons mill there was a [yellow] house built by Eleazer Carver in front of which stood a “four legged” elm tree dating back to 1833; the last part of this one-of-a-kind tree was taken down in 1954.
Hearing rumors that the area was to become a cranberry bog or the site for some manufacturing business, there were those in town who were concerned that the natural beauty of this spot would be destroyed, while others lamented the possible loss of a popular recreational area. As it turned out, the pond was drained and then allowed to be refilled after the area was surveyed. The Gammons continued to operate their business, using the old water wheel, but installing new machinery in 1910 to allow for water power when conditions proved favorable. While the public continued to use the pond, the suggestion that the town might wish to purchase and preserve the area for future public uses had been raised.\(^{114}\)

During the Civil War, tobacco consumption increased considerably, especially in the portable forms of cigars and the rather new cigarettes. These products were made by hand, and those who did this work were considered skilled craftsmen. (Samuel Gompers, who in 1877 became the president of the Cigarmakers Union in New York City, was the longtime, 1886-1924, president of the American Federation of Labor, a conglomeration of individual craft or trade unions.) In Bridgewater, cigars were sold in a number of stores in the very early 1900’s, including Casey’s and Balboni’s, but this writer does not know if any of them were made locally. But we read about the firm of Folsom and Rheume moving their cigar manufacturing business in 1910 from High Street to the building once occupied by the Bridgewater café on Broad Street. This tobacco enterprise made several brands of cigars, including the “Central Square” and the “Dino.” Folsom had hopes of enlarging the business and adding a pool room to the back of the premise. By the middle of the year, however, this cigar manufactory closed when the proprietor’s (which one?) health required him to give up the business. Around the same time, the Druggist Association Cigar Co. was carrying on a substantial business on High Street with hopes of finding new quarters where twenty-five cigar makers would be employed. According to the Bridgewater Independent, this company planned to compete with the United Cigar Co., which this newspaper labeled the largest trust in New England.\(^{115}\)

\(^{114}\) BI, April 18, July 20, 27, Aug. 8, Sept. 7, 1906, March 4, 1910.
A note to my readers: Sometime in the future a second essay will take the story of Bridgewater industries to 1925, beginning with comments based upon the United States census of 1910.
About the Author

Benjamin A. Spence, a native of Fall River, Massachusetts, a city about twenty miles south of Bridgewater, began his education in the public schools of that community. He attended Bridgewater State College between 1955 and 1959, earning his undergraduate degree in secondary education and history. After teaching social studies at the junior-senior high school level in Somerset, Massachusetts, for two years, he went on to receive his MS, 1962, and PhD, 1971, in history from the University of Wisconsin. Almost all of Dr. Spence’s teaching career was spent at Bridgewater State. Following his retirement in 1995, he began to do historical research on the Town of Bridgewater, concentrating mainly on the first quarter of the twentieth century, a period of American history in which he specialized.