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# Samuel Slater and the Development of Southern Worcester County, Massachusetts

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Samuel Slater and the Development of Southern Worcester County, Massachusetts

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Samuel Slater is considered the father of the American manufacturing and textile industry because of his introduction of the Arkwright spinning machines to America. As a determined young man he emigrated from England to America disguised as an indentured farm laborer with goals to erect Arkwright cotton spinning machines in the nation's struggling textile industry. Slater established textile mills across Southern New England with various partners; his most prosperous mills were located in Providence, Pawtucket, and Slatersville, Rhode Island and later Dudley, Oxford, and Webster, Massachusetts. Throughout his career he was known as a man who took care of his mill hands. Though Slater has his critics, the industrial pioneer was known for his extraordinary discipline, traditional management and community values, and generosity that helped establish the burgeoning textile industry and towns of Southern Worcester County, Massachusetts.

In the United States Slater is regarded as a generous and innovative industrialist, however, in his hometown of Belper he is known as "Slater the Traitor."<sup>1</sup> He fled England in spite of mechanics being barred from passage. According to the Belper News, Englishmen are still bitter over the fact that Slater blatantly memorized the detailed blueprints of the contemporary Arkwright cotton-spinning machinery, and built the same machines in America. He created

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<sup>1</sup> "Samuel Slater – Hero or Traitor?" *Belper News*, January 6, 2005.

more competition with the industry in New England as well as with his homeland.

Slater was the fifth child and second son born to William Slater of Belper, Derbyshire, England on June 9, 1768. The Slaters were a yeoman family well known for farming in Derbyshire.<sup>2</sup> From a young age, Samuel Slater exhibited strengths in a variety of skills. He showed clear and logical writing skills and mathematical talents in school. His father also made sure the children were well disciplined at a young age. William had them keep up with chores that included garden weeding, animal tending, and most importantly yarn winding. Samuel was the unspoken favorite of the Slater children. As William's health declined, Samuel was expected to take up the responsibilities left by his father.

At the age of fourteen, Samuel had asked his father to set up a formal indenture to Jedediah Strutt, one of the most distinguished early textile industrialists in England.<sup>3</sup> Strutt was hoping to expand his ventures with the help of more mill hands and Slater was looking to start work as soon as possible. The indenture to Strutt is often referred to an apprenticeship, which began in 1782. The mills owned by Strutt were known for their quality of products and

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<sup>2</sup> The Slater family lineage traces back so far into English history that they possess rights even the monarchy couldn't deny. They were treated with the up most respect across the Township of Belper.

<sup>3</sup> E. H. Cameron, *Samuel Slater: Father of American Manufacturers* (Portland: Fred. L. Tower Cos., 1960), 5.

working conditions. The Strutt mills were considered to be more humanely designed and operated in comparison to others in England at the time. Slater was taken in by Strutt at his home in Milford where he spent most of his time working with or studying the Arkwright spinning equipment. Strutt and young Samuel developed building, spinning, and business skills to operate the mills in Belper and Milford. Slater's position proved to be valuable; Strutt gave him an executive position as the overseer of new equipment. As his apprenticeship came to an end, twenty-one year old Slater looked toward the future. The Industrial Revolution of England was quickly making more headways and the United States had just gained its independence from the latter nation. Knowing full well the emigration of mechanics and manufacturers was prohibited, Slater memorized the plans and models of English spinning machinery, specifically that of Arkwright. Manufacturers and mechanics were forbidden from boarding any vessels set for the United States, for the fear of successful methods falling into the wrong hands. The only way Slater would be allowed to board was under disguise. On September 6, 1789 Samuel Slater departed for New York City masquerading as an indentured farm laborer, after informing his mother via letter that he was leaving England.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Slater wanted to keep his departure a secret, as he was secretive by nature, from his family because they would have discouraged him from doing so.

Upon his arrival to America after a 66-day journey, Slater immediately searched for work opportunities. He initially decided to travel to the United States to work in Philadelphia to construct the Arkwright machinery. Slater's first employment was to do the same at the New York Manufacturing Company of Lower Manhattan. The company was quite welcoming of English immigrants with the knowledge of the art of spinning. However, Slater grew disappointed in the company for its lack of water supply and power.

Shortly after leaving the New York Manufacturing Company, Slater encountered Captain Brown. Slater, still on the search for a more challenging and rewarding position in the textile industry, pressed the Captain for any possible companies looking for hire. Captain Brown referred Slater to Moses Brown of Providence, Rhode Island. Brown was a successful and highly respected textile industrialist who wanted to expand his practices. Impressed with Slater's experience under Strutt, Brown decided to add Slater as the third partner of the Almy and Brown textile firm in Providence. In 1793, the firm established a textile mill in Pawtucket, Rhode Island on the Blackstone River, the first of many such mills in Southern New England. In Slater's view, Pawtucket was too small of a town to support an operating textile mill; however, his opinion proved to be irrelevant. The Pawtucket mill built a positive reputation for its proficiency in

mechanics.<sup>5</sup> Slater was a key factor in the success of the mill. As early as 1790, he had pointed out defects in the machinery other employees failed to see, and he was able to construct machinery without referencing blueprints. Brown was impressed with Slater's ability of memorization considering the many failed attempts at duplicating English machinery shortly after the American Revolution.<sup>6</sup>

Moses Brown's expansion of the firm to Almy, Brown, and Slater was as successful as he projected. In 1799 William Almy and Obadiah Brown took over their respective relatives' shares in the firm. Almy, Brown, and Slater continued to operate the Pawtucket mill and another mill Slater had constructed on his own. Having already started to expand his own business, Slater wanted to build another mill with the firm. Skeptical of Slater's intentions, the Brown family was already worried that Slater's over production would flood the cotton market so Almy and Brown refused to grant Slater the rights to the water power, and from there Slater brought his two partners to court. The judge divided the waterpower rights and mill property between Almy, Brown, and Slater. With his share of the firm Slater headed up the Blackstone River Valley to Massachusetts to establish more of his own mills.

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<sup>5</sup> Also referred to as the Old Mill, the Pawtucket mill is now considered a shrine to the American textile industry.

<sup>6</sup> It has been said that Slater constructed the first successful reproduction of the Arkwright machinery in the United States

Despite the Slater family's permanent residence in Rhode Island, the patriarch was interested in the Dudley-Oxford area for two key reasons: one, the water power from the nearby lake and French River, and two, the labor from the so-called "cottage industry" would more than adequately satisfy the need for spinning and weaving cotton. Slater sought waterpower at the French River, a run off of the Blackstone River. He acquainted himself with James Tiffany of South Brimfield, a textile industrialist who also made frequent business trips between Pawtucket and Providence.<sup>7</sup> The Tiffany family partnered with Slater to form the firm Slater & Tiffany Co. James Tiffany's sons Lynman and Bela were a part of the firm; Bela acquired the water and land rights of what would become the Oxford South Gore mill in 1812. The plots of land had the valuable water-power thanks to the nearby Lake Chargoggagoggmanchauggagoggchaubunagungamaug.<sup>8</sup> With the establishment of a mill in South Oxford, Massachusetts Slater's individual success was all but assured.

From the construction of the Oxford South Gore mill came the beginnings of the Old Green mill in the East Village, which would later become Webster. The

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<sup>7</sup> Paul J. Macek and James R. Morrison. *Early History of Webster, Dudley, and Oxford*. (Webster: Published by the Authors, 2000), 215.

<sup>8</sup> Lake Chargoggagoggmanchauggagoggchaubunagungamaug is the official Nipmuc Indian name for the lake as the Native American tribe prior to colonist settlements originally settled the area. The longest lake name in the world translates to English, "I fish on my side, you fish on your side, and no one in the middle." Locals refer to the body of water as Webster Lake for short.



mill specialized in the production of yarn, as well as the dyeing and bleaching processes.<sup>9</sup> By 1813, Slater arranged for the cotton from his Pawtucket mill to be transported to the Webster facility to be spun and dyed.<sup>10</sup> He continued to expand the Old Green mill by building a factory store, and acquiring additional real estate around the lot. Slater continued to renovate his mill facility with the addition of power looms, which would eventually revolutionize the textile industry still further. Due to the on-going depression in cotton production after the War of 1812, John Tiffany decided to sell his shares of the Old Green mill to Slater in 1816, making Slater the sole owner and operator.

In the process of expanding his business Slater dabbled in the manufacture of woolen goods. While still partnered with Tiffany at the Old Green Mill of the East Village, Slater recruited Edward Howard, the man who brought the woolen manufacturing industry to America. Howard was a well-known name in the textile industry of the Dudley-Oxford area before Slater's arrival. The two acquired land around the French River, a tributary to Webster Lake, which would become the South Village. Their firm of Slater & Howard

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<sup>9</sup> Following in suit of factory production during the Civil War, the Old Green Mill converted its production of yarn to the manufacture of paper cambric and jaconet.

<sup>10</sup> Macek and Morrison, 217.

continued to acquire land from 1817 until 1821 when Howard sold half of his stake in the company to Slater, and the other half in 1822.<sup>11</sup>

Slater's mill facilities offered attractive work opportunities for many people. Around the start of the War of 1812 there was a large influx of European immigrants to the U.S.<sup>12</sup> According to E.H. Cameron, the State Department ordered all immigrants over the age of fourteen to register and name an occupation; the textile worker was the largest occupational group during that time.<sup>13</sup> Newly arrived immigrants preferred to work in factories rather than enduring the rural farm labor they left behind; however, they did have trouble financially and socially in their new environments. Slater, with his old-fashioned interest in family affairs, helped thousands of immigrants by doling advice and lending money to those in need.<sup>14</sup> Though the tri-town area attracted the fewest Irish in Massachusetts in comparison to Lowell and Waltham, many Irish stayed in the area after helping complete the Worcester and Norwich Railroad because of the two rail stops in Dudley and Webster. Later, French Canadians also immigrated to the area, many of them Catholics steeped in poverty.<sup>15</sup> In the later

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>12</sup> Roger Daniels. *Coming to America: The Triumph of Nativism*. Second ed. (New York; HarperCollins; 2002), 266.

<sup>13</sup> Cameron, 92.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> The French Huguenots, Protestants, were the first French to settle the tri-town area in the late 1600s. Shortly after the settlement, Nipmuc Native Americans murdered the Johnsons, an English family in Oxford. The incident became known as the Johnson

years, the vast Polish, Irish, and French communities in the Tri-Town area today can be traced back to the influx of European immigrants during the emerging success of Slater's Old Green mill.

### **Immigrants in the Tri-Town Area in 1855<sup>16</sup>**

#### European Countries

Towns	Population	British America	England	Ireland	France	Other Countries	Total Immigrants	Total Population
Dudley	1,182	21	37	241	--	--	341	1,523
Oxford	2,295	99	85	263	2	1	513	2,808
Webster	1,842	196	110	388	1	11	885	2,727

Slater was one of the first in the New England textile industry to utilize child laborers. In 1791 Slater employed children under the age of twelve, seven boys and two girls.<sup>17</sup> He helped create a new social class known as the mill hand. According to Cameron, “[Juvenile] work force did not strike Slater as unusual” because the mills in England where he was employed were almost overflowing with child laborers.<sup>18</sup> Having worked in Strutt's mill as a young boy, Slater served as “a striking example of the contemporary status of child labor.” But

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Massacre, and the freight drove the Huguenots out of town. The site of the massacre marked with a small obelisk located on Johnson Lane in South Oxford.

<sup>16</sup> Macek and Morrison, 29.

<sup>17</sup> David M. Kennedy, Thomas A. Bailey, and Mel Piehl. *The Brief American Pageant*. 3rd ed. (Lexington: Heath, 1993), 205.

<sup>18</sup> Cameron, 58.

Slater's youth mill hands were often orphans or from immigrant families who did not think twice about having their child live at home but work in a factory. The children grew up in households that spun their own cotton therefore providing themselves with fundamental skills Slater did not have to teach. Despite the art of spinning still being considered a novelty in the United States, the children arrived in the mills with rudimentary knowledge needed for their assigned tasks, unlike their counterparts in England.<sup>19</sup> In the 1840s child labor was not a popular form of employment. Massachusetts passed a law which stated child laborers twelve years or younger were limited to ten hours per day, which provided greater opportunity for women and immigrants.

Pauper apprentices and impoverished people comprised a high population of Slater's employees as well. As a whole, the poor generally made up most of the work force throughout New England factories. In drastic cases children of these families were confiscated because they were not being taken care of. The braver children who wanted more out of life ran away from their families out of the fear of debt inheritance. The run away children found well-off families to take them in as apprentices. The local governments in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century ordered families to house paupers, and were then compensated with an allowance.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

The wages of Slater's employees were based on many factors. The variable wages included on gender, age, marital status and skill set. Adults were paid more than child laborers, men more than women, and skilled workers more than unskilled workers. According to Barbara Tucker, "[The] minimum weekly wages for children in 1796, 1817, and 1831 were \$0.34, \$0.50, and \$0.60 respectively."<sup>20</sup> Parents and guardians oversaw the wages of all child laborers.<sup>21</sup> Unskilled male employees were paid between \$0.65 and \$1.00 per day, twice as much as children and single women. Tucker also found that monthly wages varied with certain occupations: mule spinners \$35 to \$45, blacksmiths \$28, teamsters \$23 to \$27, machinists \$15 to \$20. Working conditions during Slater's time had grown increasingly demanding. Due to this change, many industrialists implemented a wage system for each employee rather than using a family wage system. This resulted in a shift to the individual worker from the family.

### Statistics of the Three Villages<sup>22</sup>

	Year	Employees	Yards of Cloth	Monthly Wages
South Village	1832	130 families 900	8,000 150,000	\$1638 \$30,000
North Village	1832	159 families 750	63,000 1,500,000	\$25,000

<sup>20</sup> Barbara Tucker, *Samuel Slater and the Origins of the American Textile Industry 1790-1860*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 154.

<sup>21</sup> All wages of children under twenty years of age went to the parents as a stipulation of the family wage system.

<sup>22</sup> *Souvenir Edition of the Webster Times*, 11.

East Village	1832	200 families	75,000	\$8,000
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Slater also took the necessary steps to ensure the safety of his employees through working conditions and discipline. He wanted to lessen the cruel effects of the restrained factory life on the rural community children. Many employees of other industrialists during the time wasted away under long hours, scarce and scarfed down meals, and unsanitary facilities. In contrast, Slater and his factory managers kept a watchful eye on the employees, especially during the winter. The harsh New England winters caused the French River and Mill Brook to freeze which affected the water wheels. This proved dangerous to production and worker safety.<sup>23</sup> Employees were under his careful and watchful eye at all times, especially the children who fell victims to his discipline when they were out of line. The structure and insulation of the mills also proved detrimental to working conditions. The stiff winter winds slipped through the drafty, poorly insulated mill buildings. There were certainly other complaints as well from workers in the Slater mills, but they are unknown at this time.

Slater's philosophy of work differed from those of his industrialist peers like Francis Cabot Lowell. He had an authoritarian style of management much

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<sup>23</sup> Slater cared about the well being of his employees and the conditions of his mills so much that he would go in to break off the ice on the water wheels before breakfast. He suffered many physical ailments due to this hard done-by regimen he carried on during the winter months of operation.

different than the style of his Lowell factory counterpart; he stressed his traditional values in ownership and community involvement. He wanted to avoid the “wage slave” and “spindle city” descriptions.<sup>24</sup> Slater’s employees were under a strict yet flexible discipline in the mills. He ran a rigid daily schedule: a bell signaled the start and end of the day, which included two thirty and forty-five minute breaks. The family labor system allowed families to work twelve to fourteen hours per day, six days per week prior to the Massachusetts law limiting child labor hours. Slater also valued faith to instill discipline into his workers. Sunday worship enforced his values of “deference to authority, industry, obedience, punctuality, and temperance.”<sup>25</sup> He is also credited as the first to bring the institution of Sunday School to the U.S.<sup>26</sup> Though Slater was a Congregationalist, he showed preference towards Methodists in the tri-town area by providing them with land and erecting a church for them. Discipline outside of the factory was a contrast to the factory values. Slater evaded blacklists and fines to attract prospective workers to the area despite his heavy emphasis on punctuality and diligence. In addition, he also practiced leniency by refusing to levy discipline on his employees during their off hours. This strategy helped

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<sup>24</sup> Kennedy, Bailey, and Piehl, 204.

<sup>25</sup> Macek and Morrison, 27.

<sup>26</sup> In one instance, a few of his young employed men wanted to spend their Sunday afternoon picking apples in a near by orchard, when Samuel Slater himself offered them as many apples from his personal orchard as they desired and attendance at Sunday School.

Slater maintain employees longer than the average industrialist and to avoid the labor strikes that afflicted southern Massachusetts during the time.<sup>27</sup>

The Oxford South Gore mills, the lands of which would be incorporated into the town of Webster, were some of Slater's first to erect housing for the mill workers. He provided duplex and single family housing for his workers on the outskirts of the factory premises, a drastic change from the "barracks like housing in Chicopee representing a complete break with tradition."<sup>28</sup> Slater found the single-family houses created a more rural sense of community. Villages around the Oxford mills formed with post offices, general shops, department stores, grist and sawmills, schools and churches. A department store was established in the North and East Villages for the convenience of the mill hands. Slater also owned dairy farms where his employees bought milk. The disadvantage employees faced was the limitation of having to use their wages at these factory facilities. Slater also offered his adolescent and child employees the opportunity of an education by establishing the Slater School on the mill site.<sup>29</sup> He taught reading, writing, and arithmetic at the school at his Pawtucket mill

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<sup>27</sup> Many strikes broke out between the 1830s and 1840s, with at least 24 recorded by 1835. Workers were forbidden from joining unions as such organized activity was synonymous with illegal conspiracy.

<sup>28</sup> Macek, Morrison, and Macek, 219.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.



until 1796 before acquiring more suitable teachers from the College of Rhode Island.<sup>30</sup>

Slater's generosity was known throughout the tri-town area. He lent money to his struggling immigrant employees until they were financially stable, and he offered financial support to friends and family in need as well. However, his generosity could have been mistaken for bad judgment; lending out money put him at risk. Slater's personal interest and values clouded his good business policies and values. His partners who showed him a respect and friendship during their successful pasts were not so quick to help their friend when he was facing hardships. During his partnership with Almy and Brown, Slater appealed for financial aid and was denied. The refusal of aid was a critical setback for Slater that threatened his tri-town area operations.<sup>31</sup>

The tri-town area benefitted greatly from the Slater mills, especially Webster. Residents of Dudley and Oxford who worked for Slater pushed for a town in between the two for an easier commute. At the time Oxford Center was five miles from the Old Green Mill in Webster, and Dudley Center was three miles away. The area surrounding the Old Green Mill already had two churches,

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<sup>30</sup> The College of Rhode Island was established in Providence, Rhode Island in 1764, and became known as Brown University after a generous gift from alum Nicholas Brown in 1786.

<sup>31</sup> Another local business friendly to Slater, Brown & Ives, provided him temporary relief to prevent a probable collapse of the economy and Slater empire of the tri-town area.

a meetinghouse, and other industrial facilities that would have qualified for town incorporation. Other residents of Dudley and Oxford were in conflict with Slater over building dams, imposing taxes, education, banks, and other infrastructure issues. Slater discarded the respective town assessments over banks and education. He wanted to change the bank policies so he would be able to receive loans from Oxford Bank; he did not succeed, which provoked him to start a petition to prevent the charter renewal. According to Paul Macek and James Morrison, Slater also wanted to “[draw] off school taxes” to educate juvenile residents within the factories. Slater thought the practice would be cheaper that way, and it would allow him to control the content of the curriculum. The animosity towards the incorporation was a result of the change in the way of life in the tri-town area, not towards Slater. The opposition was also due to the rigidity of the residents of Dudley and Oxford wanting to live where their pioneer ancestors had settled. The angry residents were not adjusting well to their community transitioning from a rural village to an industrial mill town. They were firm on the belief that those in favor of a new town, mainly employees of Slater, should fund the new roads to link the tri-town area together. The residents in favor of the incorporation of another town between Dudley and Oxford created a petition to the General Court of Massachusetts. They wanted to name the town after their generous benefactor, Slater, who was generous enough

to donate acres of land from his Oxford South Gore mills to the new town of Webster. But there were already two Rhode Island towns named in his honor.<sup>32</sup> Slater proposed the town be named after the fine orator and Massachusetts statesman and U.S. Secretary of State, Daniel Webster. The town was incorporated on March 6, 1832 with an official population of 1,268.

Slater died on April 21, 1835 at the age of 66, and he was buried at the Mount Zion Cemetery next to the Old Green Mill. Prior to his death, he provided opportunities for his family to learn the trade to continue the legacy as acting managers to the various locations in Rhode Island and Massachusetts.

### **Slater Factories<sup>33</sup>**

1790	Almy, Brown & Slater	Pawtucket, RI
1801	S. Slater & Co.	Rehoboth, MA
1806	Almy, Brown & Slaters	Smithfield, RI
1812	Slater & Tiffany	So. Oxford, MA
1813	Oxford Dyehouse Co.	So. Oxford, MA
1814	Slater & Howard	So. Oxford, MA
1817	Providence Iron Factory	Providence, RI
	Springfield Manufacturing Co.	Ludlow, MA
1823	S & J Slater	Jewett City, CT
1826	Amoskeag Mills	Manchester, NH
1827	Providence Steam Cotton Co.	Providence, RI
	Slater, Wardwell & Co.	Providence, RI
	Slater & Kimball	So. Oxford, MA

<sup>32</sup> Slatersville and Forestdale, Rhode Island were named in honor of Samuel Slater. Slatersville was a location of one of Slater's smaller mills.

<sup>33</sup> Cameron, 147.

The business was passed down to his sons George B. Slater, John Slater, and Horatio Nelson Slater. George concentrated on the North Village Mill and focused more on the community politics of Webster and becoming its first town selectman. John split his time managing the Pawtucket, Providence, Slatersville, and Oxford properties. Horatio Slater learned the family trade at the Pawtucket facility and built the company into one of the leaders in textile manufacturing in the U.S. He kept with his father's trend of ingenuity and implemented new practices in accounting, management, marketing and purchasing to further prosperity and efficiency. Less than a year after his father's death, Horatio Slater played a role in the first signs of the Webster Fire Department. Slater & Sons Co. had purchased a small tub of water called "Tiger No.1" that served for fire protection purposes at the South Village.<sup>34</sup> The company continued making improvements until the town of Webster decided to take the matter in to its own hands. The fire department came together in 1867 to reorganize and again in 1868 appointed a committee consisting of local industrialists to obtain a water supply. The committee, which included Horatio Slater, decided that the Slater Woolen Company would help merge the water supply pipes through town.

In addition to essentially starting the town's fire department, Horatio Slater also built new blocks. Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Slater developed a four-

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<sup>34</sup> Macek and Morrison, 305.

story block on Main Street Webster. The new building boasted steam heat and gas lights along with New York dry goods. He was also an instrumental factor in extending railroads through the tri-town and Worcester area. The Norwich-Worcester rail ran through the North and South villages, and the Boston-Hartford rail stopped in Southbridge. He helped create the Providence, Webster, and Springfield Railroad; this particular rail boasted lower freight and passenger rates compared to the other line that ran through Webster.<sup>35</sup> By 1875 Horatio Slater had control of the improvements of the company. He made substantial changes to the Three Villages; he transferred the bleaching and dyeing operations of the East Village to the South Village, improved the spinning and weaving operations of the North Village. Horatio Nelson also built new establishment for folding and pressing, replaced washing rooms, and expanded a wing for a weaving room in the South Village mill. Horatio Nelson Slater remained in control of the company until his death in 1888, and then his son Horatio Nelson Slater, Jr. until 1899. After the death of Horatio Nelson Slater Jr. the company fell into the hands of the then three managers of the villages: Amos Bartlett of South Village, Frank B. Smith of North Village, and Charles. G. Washburns of East Village.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 354.

Slater was a major figure in American history – pioneer of the American Industrial Revolution. He played a significant role in the prosperity of the textile industry in the Dudley, Oxford, and Webster tri-town area as well as the rest of Southern New England. His success is a direct result of his incomparable purpose and persistence. He was a critical factor in the development of the American cotton industry as well, so much so that President Andrew Jackson visited Slater's Pawtucket mill and referred to him as the "Father of American Manufacturers."<sup>36</sup> Slater's textile industry left a lasting impression on the tri-town area. Slater created a mecca for mechanics from home and abroad searching for employment. His management tactics can be considered early sitings of fair trade production.

Behind Slater's success were his dedicated and faithful factory employees. They maintained their positions in the factories as a result of Slater's manipulative tactic; establishing quarters, churches, schools, and general stores on the factory grounds as well as trying to know his employees on a personal level. Those tactics factored into the maintenance of employees who produced high quality fabrics for consumption. However, the conditions in Slater's factories look a lot better than some factories in Eastern Asia. Companies such as Banana Republic and Old Navy outsource employment to Asia, where

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<sup>36</sup> Macek and Morrison, 222.

employees work in horrible conditions for little compensation. The commonalities between Slater's New England textile factories and the factories in Bangladesh are eerily present but also drastically different in the deliberate manipulation of the employees.

The factories in Eastern Asia, specifically Bangladesh, typically employ women and young children as well. Many women and children in developing countries of Southeast Asia are at or below the poverty level, which makes up a large part of the population. Immigrants Slater employed and the employees in Bangladesh were eagerly looking for employment to support their families, and children were small enough to thread fabric and reach into small spaces in the machinery. Immigrants coming to America worked for cheaper wages than native-born Americans, and children were paid according to age as well. Employees in the factories in Bangladesh are willing to work for any wage rate as long as they can take it home to support their families.

The low wages of factories in Bangladesh also coincide with terrible work conditions. Workers in Bangladesh often endure over twelve hour days breathing toxic fumes in factories with windows bolted shut. Breaks during the workday were short or non-existent. These factories are commonly known as "sweatshops" due to their hazardous and grueling conditions for the cheap wages. The harsh conditions of the factories in Bangladesh were key

contributions to the 1,127 death toll of the April 2013 factory collapse, which drew comparisons to the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire of 1911 in the U.S.<sup>37</sup> Only after the factory collapse did the government in Bangladesh push to reform factory conditions and raise the minimum wage. The pressure for factory reforms even went so far as President Obama restricting trade with Bangladesh.

Management is a key role in a business in order to oversee production and sales. The management of the Slater factories was inherently manipulating the employees. Slater wanted to make their employment worth their while, so he established factory housing on the lot. The houses were close to the factory with the convenience of a short walk to work, which meant little to no acceptable excuses for arriving late to work. Churches were also established on the factory premises. Slater provided a place of worship to instill discipline and faith into the lifestyles of his employees. The factories in Bangladesh offer little to no benefits for their employees. Major athletic brand Nike is a one of the biggest names in the sweatshop business as it is well known to mistreat outsourced employees.

Many American companies outsource labor to Eastern Asian countries for cheaper labor and lower production prices. This is in part of “the lure of new

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<sup>37</sup> Shelly Banjo, “Inside Nike’s Struggle to Balance Cost and Worker Safety in Bangladesh,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 21, 2014.



items continuously bombarding American consumers.”<sup>38</sup> Within the past 40 years, clothing has essentially become a disposable commodity. In order to keep up with the rising demand of items, developing countries have become the sites of new factories to mass-produce the items at a cheaper cost. The factories provide the impoverished populations of countries like Bangladesh, Vietnam and Cambodia with jobs. These jobs are especially important to women in the third world countries by providing them with their first jobs. However, the wages a worker makes in Cambodia makes \$0.13 a day and \$37 a month in comparison to the American minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour.<sup>39</sup> The accumulation of the small wages allows more impoverished people to transition to the middle class. The populations of the third world countries where these factories are established have become dependent on this system.

Was there an advantage to investing in immigrant or outsourced factory labor? The availability of cheap and abundant workers willing to work long hours proved to be beneficial to Slater and the managers of the clothing company factories of Eastern Asia. However, there was a clear difference in the factories conditions of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and today. The employees of Slater were more than likely manipulated into working under the seemingly harsh

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<sup>38</sup> Patricia Smith, “The High Price of Cheap Fashion,” *The New York Times Upfront Magazine*, September 2013, 13.

<sup>39</sup> Banjo, “Inside Nike’s Struggle to Balance Cost and Worker Safety in Bangladesh.”

conditions while the workers in Eastern Asia are more willing to work under harsher conditions for longer hours to support their families. The outcomes of the Bangladesh factory collapse “has forced Western apparel sellers to re-examine their world-wide search for cheap labor.”<sup>40</sup> As mentioned in the New York Times’ Up Front Magazine, there is a hope for change. Nike is currently working on finding a balance between acceptable and fair work conditions and monitoring budgets. The athletic wear giant is still in the process of “cleaning up its act in the developing world, which began about 20 years ago.”<sup>41</sup> Consumers want to become more aware of where their clothes come from and the workers who make them. Eventually there will come a time when clothing will cease to be a disposable good; the cost of labor in China is already on the rise.<sup>42</sup> The transition to “fair-trade” clothes and goods is becoming more common. Fair-trade goods are those made sustainably and that the people who produced them were compensated in a just manner. Though only 2 percent of the clothes sold in the U.S. are made in the U.S., a reform for factory conditions is sure to be reached within the decade.

Despite his success, Slater experienced personal and business failures. His first wife Hannah Wilkinson died on their 21<sup>st</sup> wedding anniversary in 1812. He

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<sup>40</sup> Smith, 15.

<sup>41</sup> Banjo, “Inside Nike’s Struggle to Balance Cost and Worker Safety in Bangladesh.”

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

remarried to Esther Parkinson, widow of the Pennsylvania cotton buyer Robert Parkinson who Slater considered a personal friend. Slater's eldest son and two daughters died during infancy, and son Thomas Graham Slater passed away during adolescence. Slater also faced ailments of his own; personal management of the Old Green Mill during the winter took a harsh toll of Slater's body. Slater was a man of family and integrity, while others saw him as a man consumed with the acquisition of wealth and status. Slater benefited the people of South Central Massachusetts both financially and socially despite apparent claims against him. As stated by Cameron,

“Slater made [Webster] his residence of many years...No man of his time engaged in business in this country was more generally known or maintained more highly his integrity for fair and honorable dealings, or whose moral worth was more highly regarded. His naturally kind feelings inclined him to acts of benevolence, and no one with a just claim for favor left him without partaking of his liberality...the rise and progress of this business [Samuel Slater & Sons] has made the town of Webster.”<sup>43</sup>

There's no doubt that Slater was dedicated to his business, yet in spite his critics he remains a remarkable man with a genius for technology, management, business, great generosity and humility.

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<sup>43</sup> Cameron, 119.

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