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141 cambridge street boston mass 02114

ROYALSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

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TOUR NOTES

by

William W. Owens, Jr.

The greater part of Royalston was deeded in 1752 to a group of proprietors whom later history would find to be politically incompatible. Best known among these are Isaac Royal, later a loyalist who returned to England during the Revolutionary War, (Royal died there in 1781) , James Otis and Thomas Hancock. John Hancock later succeeded to his uncle's interest, and James Bowdoin joined the group. The other original proprietors were Samuel Watts, Thomas Hubbard, Isaac Freeman, Joseph Richards, Caleb Dana, Joseph Wilder, Jr., and John Chandler, Jr.

Reputedly, the proprietors' first meeting was held in the Bunch of Grapes Tavern in Boston, on the corner of King Street and Mackrell Lane (now State and Kilby Streets). It is not unlikely that Isaac Royal was regarded as one of the most prominent members of the group, as the new settlement was first called Royalshire - the suffix being more suited for a county than a town.

The Seven Years War followed, so not much was done about settling the new entity until after the fall of Canada and the end of the French and Indian threat.

The 1760s saw settlement begin in earnest. In 1761, deeds were delivered to twenty-one settlers. Royalshire was changed to Royalston, and the legislature awarded the town charter in 1765. Royal must have been pleased to have his name municipized (an honor which belonged to the very prominent in Massachusetts Colonial Society - e.g. Bernardston, Pepperell

and Shirley), as he donated 25 pounds toward construction of the first meeting house (begun in 1764), and supplied it with a bible.

Royalston sent delegates to the first and second Continental Congresses, and men from the town fought in the Revolution. In 1777, a "large company" from Royalston marched to meet Burgoyne's advance. "Not a town in this grand old commonwealth of historic towns", boasts the History of Worcester County, "can boast a better beginning or a more reputable heritage of name and blood."

By 1800, the population had grown to 1243 (from 617 in 1765), and the town's boundaries had changed through annexations from Athol and Gerry (Phillipston) (South Royalston was thus annexed in 1799). Winchendon and Orange gained a little at Royalston's expense.

Some small industry sprang up along Lawrence Brook, to the South of the Center. Buildings around the common were principally residential, but there were stores and even a facility for palm leaf preparation (Palm leaves were chemically treated, cut into strips and used for weaving into bonnets, etc.). In South Royalston, one Benjamin Blanchard built a saw and grist mill on the Miller's River, where subsequently the first buildings of the Royalston Cotton and Wool Manufacturing Company were

erected; that company having been incorporated in 1812.

The company was not successful under its original owners. The first building burned down in 1833, whereupon Rufus Bullock acquired what remained of the plant with the mill privilege. In 1834, he built a new mill - a three and one-half story, pitch-roof, stone building with clerestory, a five-story clapboarded bell tower and lower adjoining buildings (see copies of old photographs to be passed out on the bus). Bullock continued the business "with large profits" until his death in 1858, after which his heirs "unloaded it" onto Col. George Whitney and one Daniel Day.

Col. Whitney holds a prominent place in Royalston history: A farmer's son and one-time teamster between Royalston and Boston, he was appointed South Royalston station agent of the Vermont and Massachusetts Railroad, which position he held ( largely in sinecure, no doubt ) until his death in 1897. Col. Whitney served in the legislature in 1859, was a Massachusetts Senator ( state senator ) 1863-64, a member of the Governor's Council for five consecutive years in the seventies and again a state representative in the early ninties.

An 1876 insurance survey describes "George Whitney's Woolen Mill", South Royalston, as water powered with steam heat, "in fair practical working condition", but lacking a watchman with watch

clock. The mill produced "fancy cassimeres, ... stock - wool, 5 to 35 percent of Cotton, a very little Shoddy in some goods." The main building was of stone with "zinc-covered doors and frames at each end", a shingle roof with "16 inch projection, boxed" wood cornice. "Floors - common on joists, belt-boxed, but small openings remain".

Col. Whitney believed in feeding his employees well. In contrast with typical mill boarding house food - salt codfish, beans, corned beef and cabbage, hash, "and other delicacies calculated to furnish a maximum amount of strength for toil at a minimum cost", Col. Whitney served "roasts, steaks, fresh vegetables of various kinds, hot biscuits and butter that was above suspicion with excellent bread and pastry." For such fare, men were charged \$2.25 per week; women only \$1.75 - the assumption being made that women ate less. Col. Whitney ate at his own boarding house, but he eschewed male company at mealtime, preferring, instead, to dine with the ladies.

By the mid-1860's, South Royalston had 78 dwelling houses. It produced lumber, staves, shingles and chairs. In 1864, 18000 pounds of palm leaf were processed, while 6000 mosquito frames and 70,000 trundle hoops were assembled. That year, the mill was said to have produced 166,673 yards of cassimeres, worth \$233,346 (that comes to \$1.40 per yard).

Fire claimed the mill in 1892, causing a temporary lapse in wool production at South Royalston. The George Whitney Woolen Company moved to Enfield, New Hampshire, but later rebuilt its South Royalston mill. Col. Whitney died in 1897. In 1908, the American Woolen Company acquired the South Royalston mill, which then switched production to yarns and bed blankets. A 1920 American Woolen Company publication lists ten sets of cards, 82 broad looms, 2976 wooden spindles, 3 boilers and three water wheels at the South Royalston mill.

William Wood, the President of American Woolen Company, never recovered from his son's untimely death in an automobile accident. In 1926, he shot himself. Following his death, the company reorganized, the South Royalston mill was idled and, finally shut down in 1930.

Having left the Center and common for this rather interesting story of industrial history in South Royalston, it would not do to neglect a rather ambitious try at industrialization at the Center, itself:

In 1856-57, a stock company was organized to build a steam mill to manufacture chairs in competition with similar enterprises in nearby towns. A four story frame building "of substantial mill construction" was put up to the East of the Northeast end of

the common. There was a brick building for the steam plant (which included three "huge" boilers) with a tall brick chimney.

Immediately, financial problems arose - the plant was abandoned and never put to its intended use on its Royalston site. Of course, children played in and around the vacant structure.

The lonely place found some activity in connection with the 1865 Royalston centennial celebration when fifty-cent dinners were served to children in the building, while adults paid two dollars to eat in a tent on the grounds. Ultimately, the factory was not to be altogether cheated out of its birth-right. It was taken down and re-erected in Fitchburg as a piano factory. The building later served as part of the Simond Manufacturing Company until its demise by demolition in 1905.

The architectural history of the Center and common can best be told by the place, itself, which has been uniquely undisturbed since taking its present form around the middle of the nineteenth century. In style, the common is largely Federal and Greek Revival. The Rufus Bullock and Sibley houses, to be visited (no.s 15 and 6 on the attached plan) are Federal, as is the "Bastille" (named for destruction of a barn on the property) on the East side of the common (No. 5), and the Barnet Bullock (No. 13) and Raymond houses at the North end of the common on the West side.

The Peirce-Stow and Adams-Burr houses (19 and 20) bring up the same style on the South and West. Evidently, the Federal style enjoyed considerable longevity in Royalston.

The Greek Revival made its appearance with the Old School House (No.1) in 1835, and is most prominently reflected in the First Congregational Church (No. 16), completed in 1852.

The following notes provide some detail on the houses which we shall visit and some of the more interesting others on the common.

Old School House (No. 1 on plan). Built 1835 on land formerly the garden of Joseph Lee, first settled minister of Royalston (he presided from 1768 - 1818), donated by his heirs. In 1860 the building was turned around. It served as a school until the 1940's, and is now the home of the Post Office and the Royalston Historical and Village Improvement Society.

The Lightning Rods (No.3) "modified Greek Revival"- built 1839 - probably by J.E.P. Austin. This seems to have been more or less the resident physician's house, having been the home of Drs. Willis Horace T. Hanks, Deane and Adams.

The Columns (Greek Revival) (No.4). Built around 1838 by either Moses Nichols or Dr. Isaac P. Willis. It was later owned by a musician, George F. Miller, and then "came into the possession of Calvin Bullock".

The Bastille (No.5 - Federal style) Built 1830 by Reverend Ebenezer Perkins who lived there until his death in 1861. The balustrade is comparatively modern, having been added in 1927.

Jonathan Sibley House (Federal - No. 6). Built 1819 by Rebecca Sibley, second wife of Lieutenant Jonathan Sibley (d. 1818). She lived there until 1853, in which year she died at age 92. The store was added by Obadiah Walker in 1872.



Goddard House ( No. 10 - Greek Revival) Built or rebuilt by William Raymond around 1847. Raymond gave the town land extending the common northward to his house. House acquired by Ashbel Goddard (his descendants of rocketry fame) in the early 1850's.

Phineas Newton Library (Revived Greek Revival - No. 14). Built 1911 on land formerly part of the Rufus Bullock Estate donated by William H. Hill. Architects H. M. Francis & Sons, Fitchburg; builders Boutwell & Damon, Fitchburg.

Rufus Bullock Mansion (No. 15 - Federal) Believed to have been built by Lemuel Fales (c. 1807). Acquired soon thereafter by Rufus Bullock. An older house attached to the rear is believed to date from 1764. Said to have been built three stories high, but that Bullock cut off the third story. Part of the building served as a store, and it may have been a tavern or an inn as well. Rufus Bullock's daughter, Emily, later added the cast-iron fencing, granite walks and steam heat. There is an upstairs ballroom. The house displays stencilling believed to have been done by Moses Eaton. Alexander Hamilton Bullock, a Governor of Massachusetts during the 1860s was born here. The building was purchased by William H. Hill of Boston "before the turn of the century".

First Congregational Church (No. 16 - Greek Revival) Built 1852. Chauncey Chase, architect. This building replaced an 1840 meeting house which had superseded the 1797 meeting house on the same site. The 1840 building was short-lived; it burned in 1851. The new church was deemed to be a "model of what a rural sanctuary should be - beautiful for its situation, beautiful in itself and sustained in all its parts and appointments."

Town Hall (No. 17 - Mansard Style) Built c. 1867. Chauncey Chase, architect. This could have been an architect's "bootstrap" operation. Chase was on the building committee appointed to consider the matter of a new town hall, gave the land and acted as architect and contractor. The original authorized expenditure (\$6000) had to be upped to \$9000. Final cost: \$8999.97. Dedication was December 17, 1867, Governor Bullock being one of the speakers at the ceremony. Joseph Raymond presented marble Civil War memorial tablets, and Mrs. Emily Bullock Ripley gave the American Eagle vane on the cupola.

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# ROYALSTON HISTORIC DISTRICT

