

# NEWPORT HISTORY



Newport Historical Society

THE HON. HENRY MARCHANT

*Bulletin of the Newport Historical Society*

Number 136

Fall, 1969

Vol. 42, Part 4

NEWPORT HISTORY  
published as the quarterly bulletin of  
NEWPORT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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## THE SILK CRAZE IN RHODE ISLAND

by

RICHARD L. CHAMPLIN

For the upwards of one hundred fifty years the residents of Rhode Island responded to the lure of producing silk. Sericulture, as eighteenth century promoters called it, held for them a bright future. This lure was sparked by the arrival of the Huguenots in 1686. It glowed during pre-Revolutionary times. It flared and fizzled in the 1830's, perhaps the victim of the financial panic of 1836. Now only an occasional Mulberry tree, a relic of the craze, or second generation trees, remain to grace the landscape and feed the avid birds.

The Mulberry, this herb for the service of mankind, has traveled far. It seems to have grown first in China, where silkworms were fed its leaves, but enterprising men transplanted it to other parts of Asia, Europe and America. Botanically known as *Morus alba*, the White Mulberry has many horticultural varieties. Early explorers in North America found another species of Mulberry growing natively up and down the continent, the Red Mulberry, *Morus rubra*. Peter Kalm, a botanist-explorer from Sweden, wrote in 1748, "Here (at Philadelphia) are different species of mulberry trees which grow wild in the forests of North and South America. In these parts the red mulberry trees are more plentiful than any other. However, Mr. Bartram assured me that he had seen the white mulberry trees growing wild, but that they were scarce. I asked him and several other people of this country why they did not set up silk manufactures, having such a quantity of mulberries which succeed so well . . . But they replied that it would not be worth while to erect any silk mills here because labor was so expensive . . . They were therefore of the opinion that the cultivation of all sorts of grain, of hemp and of flax would be of greater advantage and that at the same time it did not require nearly so much care as the feeding of silk worms."<sup>1</sup> But if the Red Mulberry



was common elsewhere, it is decidedly not in Rhode Island, and besides the finicky silkworms found it not at all to their liking. They have a decided preference for White Mulberry.

The silkworm is called by biologists *Bombyx mori*. Other worms produce cocoons, some with fibers suitable for silk, but *Bombyx mori* alone satisfies the silk culturist. A single worm can produce one thousand yards of silk fiber. This comes as a fluid from its body, a fluid not unlike the latex from India rubber trees. No coincidence, this, since the Mulberry is botanically closely allied to the rubber tree.

In Rhode Island the culture of silk properly began with the arrival of the Huguenots, fugitives from France. A band of forty families settled in that part of East Greenwich still called for them, Frenchtown. The year, 1686. At their hands orchards and vineyards took shape, and as these Huguenots expected another five hundred families to join them from France, the manufacture of silk by a people who had brought the skill with them seemed assured. Their enterprise might have made Rhode Island the silk capitol of North America. But all did not proceed according to plan. Unbeknownst to them, the Huguenots had purchased land from a certain Atherton Company, which in turn held no clear deeds to the land. For one thing, in those days of unsettled boundaries, the Connecticut Colony laid claim to all lands up to the west shore of Narragansett Bay. Furthermore, the settlers of East Greenwich claimed prior, legal ownership of the land Col. Atherton had sold, and they, the East Greenwich men, to prove their point took possession of the Huguenot crops of hay, built roads through Huguenot lands and even personally molested these strangers in their midst. The Frenchtown colony which had started with such promise and solidarity of purpose, broke up, leaving but two or three families to brave the hostilities. On land known as the French Orchard, and in that vicinity may be found a few Mulberry trees today, no doubt the offspring of the original Huguenot plantation.

Lord Bellomont, governor of the New York Colony, confirmed the Huguenot intentions to produce silk when he wrote, "A little before my leaving Boston some of those French that had been routed out of the Narragansett country, came to see me, and among other things they recommended the planting of Mulberry



Photo by John Hopf

SPRIG OF MULBERRY WITH SILK WORM COCOONS  
Loaned by Mr. Champlin

1 Kalm, Peter. *Peter Kalm's Travels in North America*. N. Y., Wilson-Erickson, Inc., 1937. I 66-67.

trees in these countries for breeding silkworms and making silk. They told me that improvement would quickly and easily be brought to pass, for that a mulberry tree of two years growth is fit for silkworms . . . Certainly if raw silk could be furnish'd from these plantations and manufactur'd in England it would be a useful commodity."<sup>2</sup> (Note that the silk was to be manufactured in England, not the colonies. This skill, like the weaving of cotton later, was the exclusive property of the Motherland.)

Some of the Frenchmen driven from East Greenwich fled to Newport, among them Daniel Ayrault. There he must have found the Grinnell family established at Portsmouth and must have been on hand to receive the Lucas family, the De Bloises and the Marchants, who arrived later. Conceivably these Frenchmen kept alive the art of silk culture, for a century later in Newport the Rev. Ezra Stiles was writing in his *Diary* about his own silkworms, thousands of them. Had his acquaintance with Henry Marchant encouraged his interest in silk?

Before focusing on his experience, take a broader glimpse at the colonies. At the urging of King James I, Virginia had assumed the lead in silk culture. Her Assembly had directed the planting of Mulberries in 1623 and even offered premiums for it. From Savannah, Georgia eight pounds of raw silk were sent to London in 1735, presented to the Queen as cloth, and received high praise. Between 1755-1772 well over eight thousand pounds of raw silk were exported to England. South Carolina, too, produced silk at this period. In Connecticut, Ezra Stiles' friend Aspinwall had started a nursery of White Mulberry.

Benjamin Franklin from London in 1769 spoke out in support of silk culture. Corresponding with Cadwallader Evans at Philadelphia, he wrote, "I think the bounty is offered for silk from all the colonies in general . . . A public filature should be set for winding them there; or every family should learn to wind their own . . . If some provision were made by the Assembly for promoting the growth of mulberry trees in all parts of the province, the culture of silk might afterwards follow easily . . . There is no doubt with me but that it might succeed in our country. It is the happiest of

2 O'Callaghan, Edmund Bailey, ed. Documents relative to the colonial history of the State of New York; procured in Holland, England and France by John Romeyn Brodhead. Albany. Weed Parsons, 1854. Earl Bellomont to the Lords of Trade, IV, 788.

all inventions for clothing."<sup>3</sup>

On this happy note let us turn to the *Diary* of Ezra Stiles. Invested at his church at Newport, Stiles found time for silk culture. An entry for June 4, 1771 reads, "I have now Three Thousand Silkworms hatched."<sup>3A</sup> And a month later, "Above Three Thousd Silkworms are cocooing (sic.) perhaps 150 remain feeding, & almost satiated."<sup>4</sup>

The next year his patience (and his wife's) rewarded him with tangible evidence. His close friend in Newport, Henry Marchant, (See cover photograph) while on a visit in London arranged to have some silk, produced by the Stileses, turned into cloth. The account of this success story begins, "Last Evening I received a Letter from London dated May 14, wherein Mr. Marchant informs me that he had gotten the *raw silk*, we raised and sent over to him, manufactured, and that the Silk Man a Capital Man in the Business said — your Silk was of the best kind he ever had; much better than the Philadelphia Silk he used for the Shute only — *the whole warp is of your own*, which is always of the best Silk. He was surprized to find it so well wound off by a person untutored in the Art, for those little parcels which appeared like mere Snarls all wound very well and with little Wast.' I sent home about 21 Ounces and desired Mr. Marchant to buy some raw Philadelphia Silk if a few ounces were wanting, that the whole might be American Manufacture. The most of that I sent was wound at Charlestown and Philadelphia by European Winders but the little parcellls were wound by my wife seven years ago, and by much handling became snarled, yet was well wound according to the Italian manner."<sup>5</sup>

Back in Newport again, Marchant, according to Stiles, "sent in a Piece of Silk, green Ducape, striped and sprigged, *ten yards and a quarter*, 22 9/10 Inches or nearest *twenty three Inches* wide i. e. above half yard and half quarter; Selvedge one Tenth of an Inch; weighing *Eighteen Ounces* and 2/3 oz. Avoirdupois. Mr. Marchant procured it to be manufactured in London, out of about

3 Franklin, Benjamin. *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin* collected and edited with a life and introduction by Albert Smyth. N. Y., Macmillan, 1906. V. 228-229.

3A Stiles, Ezra. *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*. N. Y., Scribner's Sons, 1901. I, 107.

4 *Ibid.*, I, 117.

5 *Ibid.*, I, 251.



*twenty one ounces of raw Silk raised by my Wife and sent over to him last Winter; he procured of Dr. Franklin some Philadelphia Silk (i.e. of American Culture) to make out enough. The manufacturing cost £2.14.6 and the Philadelphia Silk 11s.3d. So the whole cost £3.5.9 sterling which Mr. Marchant paid and generously presented to us. And this Day it is making up into a Gown; which my Wife gives (after she has done with it) to Betsy, or the oldest Daughter surviving her; to be preserved as a Memorial of her once having a Silk Gown made of Silk of her own Raising.”<sup>6</sup>*

For Ezra Stiles this domestic success marked a beginning. Although he makes no mention of Mulberries, silk worms or silk during the Revolution, later when he had moved to New Haven and became the president of Yale College, he ardently continued his interest in silk culture. Collaborating with Nathaniel Aspinwall, he distributed thousands of Mulberry seeds to Connecticut parishes with elaborate plans for their culture and production. But his Rhode Island career had drawn to a close.

The high noon of silk culture was approaching in the Republic. Full of energy and enterprise and inventiveness the young nation looked in every direction for outlets to express these assets. Silk lured her citizens. It received a boost both locally and nationally. In 1828 the United States Secretary of the Treasury, Richard Rush, published a report on the manufacture of silk intended to show that in all parts of the country White Mulberry might be raised with success and profit.<sup>7</sup> This activity on a national scale led to the formulating of a “Silk Bill” in Congress, the sole purpose of which was to spur on the manufacture of silk. Oddly enough, when the Bill came before the House in 1832, Rhode Island’s two Representatives, Tristram Burges and Dutee J. Pearce, voted against passage, as did the majority of the House, and the Silk Bill fell like a dead leaf from the tree.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless it took more than that set-back to deter enthusiasm.

A native son of Newport, William H. Vernon, published in 1828 his annotated translation of M. de la Brousse’s *A Methodical Treatise on the Cultivation of the Mulberry Tree, on the Raising of*

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., I, 292-293.

<sup>7</sup> U. S. Treasury Department. *Letter from the Secretary of The Treasury . . . in relation to the growth and manufacture of silk, adapted to the different parts of the Union.* Washington, printed by Duff Green, 1828.

<sup>8</sup> U. S. Congress. *Register of Debates in Congress.* VIII, pt. 3, 3095.



Photo by John Hopf

#### SILK DRESS FROM THE MALBONE FAMILY

Shows the styles of the mid-eighteenth century. The flowered pattern embroidered over-all. The silk was probably woven in England. Property of Newport Historical Society.

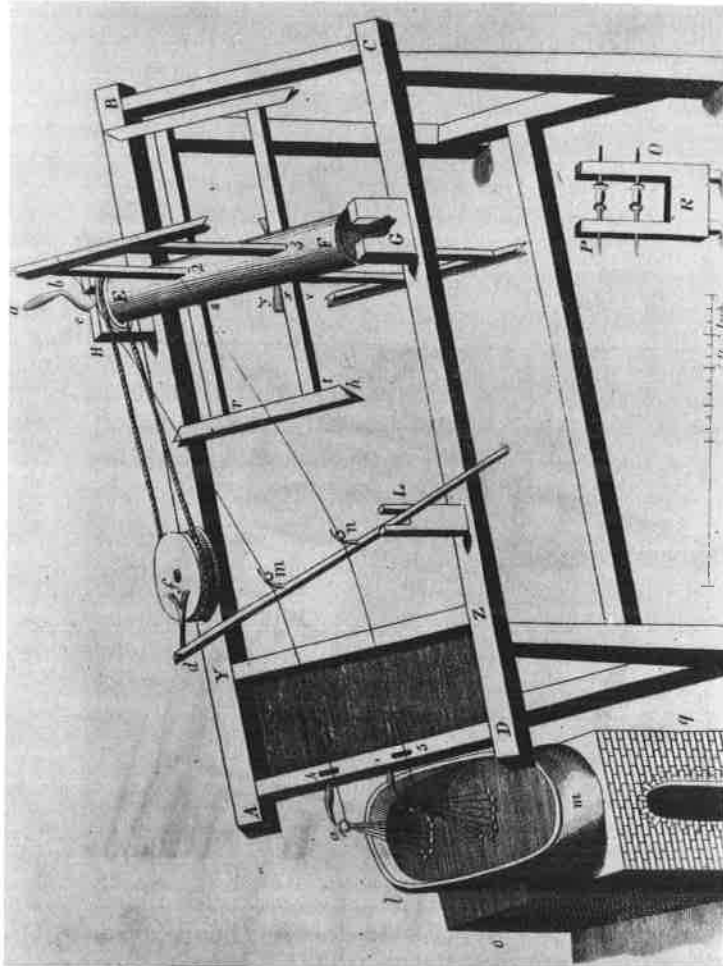


Photo by John Hopf

## ANCIENT MILL

"... the French commonly used [this type mill] to draw silk from the cocoons it was most certainly the basis of those used in this country with only slight changes added or altered to bring it nearer to perfection." *The Mulberry Tree* by William H. Vernon, published by Hilliard, Gray & Co., 1828.

*Silk Worms, and on Winding the Silk from the Cocoons.* A revealing feature of the publication consists of Vernon's footnotes, in which he explained the local practice of silk manufacture, especially on the Island of Aquidneck. He wrote, "I have some reason to believe that all these rules are unknown or neglected by those who raise the silkworm in Connecticut, where a considerable sum, (30, or 40,000 dollars) is annually realized by this business. For several years in succession, a worthy female came from that diligent State to this Island, and took charge of a brood of twenty or thirty thousand silk-worms, produced in alternate years on two farms in the vicinity of Newport. When I visited the establishment, the worms were at the last days of their fifth age, and were so crowded — the term is too feeble — they were literally so accumulated on the tables, that as I then judged, there could not have been less than three hundred to the square foot. Most of them were diseased, and some of them were lying dead upon the stale litter, and those in health were crawling in multitudes over the sick and the dead, and over each other. Now this is barbarous; yet I was afterwards informed, that, notwithstanding such outrageous mismanagement, more than fifteen pounds of silk were collected from that ill-conducted brood."<sup>9</sup>

Nowhere does Vernon identify the "worthy female" or the two farms where a brood was raised on alternate years. Perhaps one was the Lawrence Farm on the east shore of Portsmouth, where to the present time tradition has it that silk was produced. Could the other farm have been Vacluse? We can only speculate.

Scouting out the locations of silk ventures in the state leads to scores of potential sites. For example, an exceptionally large Mulberry grows on the Jamestown farm of Mr. Sydney L. Wright. It measures 10 ft. 2½ inches in circumference. (This is not quite a national record for size, however, since one growing in Maryland measures 16 ft. 2 in.)<sup>10</sup> The trunk of this Jamestown tree is the last of three of comparable girth, two having succumbed to wind storms in recent years. This and another large mulberry on that Island give rise to the guess that some sort of silk enterprise took place there.

9 Brousse, M. D. L. *A Methodical Treatise on the Cultivation of the Mulberry Tree, on the Raising of Silk Worms, and on Winding the Silk from the Cocoons* . . . Abridged from the French of M. De La Brousse: with notes and an appendix by William H. Vernon of Rhode Island. Boston, Hilliard, Gray & Co., 1828, 81.

10 American Forestry Association's Social Register of Big Trees, as published in *American Forests*, January and February, 1961.

In the town of Foster in 1800 Dr. Solomon Drowne, the Revolutionary physician and later professor of botany at Brown University, built a home on a site he named Mt. Hygeia, approached by a road with still another classical name, the Appian Way (the present Route 101). At Mt. Hygeia Drowne planted a host of exotic trees and plants, and some still exist nearby as escapees from his cultivation. Owned down to the present by members of the Drowne family, the farm had its own plantation of Mulberries. An observer in 1901, Howard W. Preston, after talking with the owner, a Drowne, reported, "There were two fields of White Mulberries during the silkworm craze."<sup>11</sup> A box of unused cocoons was discovered under the eaves of the homestead, evidence that someone had strong intentions of making silk, and perhaps had actually made some. In the collection of Drowne memorabilia at Brown University, may be seen a swatch of white, fine silk with a colorful bouquet painted on it in oil. The label on this item reveals that Eliza, daughter of Solomon Drowne, painted the bouquet. It stops short of saying that the silk was Mt. Hygeia produce. Like other experimenters in the state, the Drownes may never have produced enough silk to sell. Perhaps it simply sufficed for limited family use.

North Scituate, too, set its hopes on silk manufacture. In October 1836 the General Assembly granted to George W. Tyler a charter to incorporate the Scituate Silk Company and to "do all other things proper and necessary to the success of their business in the production and manufacture of silk and silk goods."<sup>12</sup> But this venture never went into production, and seems to have done little more than lend a name to a road in North Scituate, Silk Lane, which, as some of the town fathers have heard, was once lined with Mulberry trees.

The Dyer family of Cranston undertook probably the most ambitious enterprise of all. On ancestral lands along Pocasset Brook they planted acres of Mulberries. Indeed, the area goes by the name Mulberry Grove, the location of Pocasset Cemetery. In 1832 Dr. Benjamin Dyer appeared at an agricultural fair in Providence "dressed in a beautiful suit of silk" made from material produced

<sup>11</sup> Preston, Howard Willis. *Botanical Notebook*, 1877-1919. 3 vols., at the University of Rhode Island Library.

<sup>12</sup> *Acts and Resolves of the General Assembly of Rhode Island*, October, 1836; 71.



Photo by Brown Photo Lab

#### PAINTING ON SILK

Done by Elizabeth Drowne, daughter of Solomon Drowne, probably in the latter part of the eighteenth century. The silk for this cloth may very well have been grown on the Drowne farm in Foster, R. I. Property of John Hay Library in Brown University.



and manufactured by his own family.<sup>13</sup> What a figure this gay blade must have cut.

Twelve years later, according to Field's account, "The Valentine Silk Company was formed in Providence for the raising and manufacture of silk, with a capital of \$100,000. It was conducted by Messrs. Dyer, and had a cocoonery one hundred and fifty feet long, and a big nursery of mulberry trees. A new method for winding silk upon spools or bobbins, instead of reels, invented by Gamaliel Gay, of Poughkeepsie, N. Y., was introduced into this mill in 1835, and ten or twelve different fabrics of silk or cotton and silk woven in this establishment upon the Gay loom were exhibited in the following March at Albany, N. Y."<sup>14</sup>

Capt. William Henry Dyer failed to keep the business alive for more than a year, however, and he personally moved to Fredericksburg, Virginia, where he continued the business for another three years. But by 1839 the Valentine Silk Company in Providence and Cranston, with its 40,000 mulberry trees set out, collapsed. A few squat trees survive by Pocasset Brook.

Still another silk venture loomed at Bristol. In 1836, as Coleman tells us, "four stockholders sought to revive the defunct Mount Hope Bank at Bristol. They proposed to double its capital and to invest \$50,000 in a filature to provide employment for the families of the port's whalers and sailors. Without the support of the bank, claimed these promoters, the novel enterprise could never raise sufficient funds to go into operation. Nothing came of this petition. Another group brought forward its proposal in 1839. It asked to be incorporated as the Washington Silk Company and requested state assistance. The organizers wanted a lottery to raise capital, a prohibition on the peddling of imported silk, and the right to sell their goods without paying the usual peddling fees. During the undertaking's formative stage, ran their argument, and until Congress gave the industry adequate protection, the company needed all

13 **The Biographical Cyclopedia of Representative Men of Rhode Island.** Providence, National Biographical Publishing Co., 1881; 171. This episode of Dyer sheds light in a note that appeared in Newport Historical Society Bulletin No. 78, Jan. 1931, 12: "James Barker was born in 1700, Dec. 30. His grandson, Isaac, is said to have been the first person in America, possibly the only one to have a suit of clothes made of silk from worms of his own raising." Edith May Tilley, **A Newporter's Wanderings in Genealogical By-Paths.**

14 Field, Edward, ed. **State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations at the End of the Century: A History.** Boston & Syracuse. The Mason Publishing Co., 1902; III, 367.

the encouragement the General Assembly could give. When a legislative committee balked at these unusual requests, the promoters withdrew their charter petition to prevent its outright rejection."<sup>15</sup>

Just as the prospect of gold dazzled the imagination of Americans a decade later, so in the 1830's did silk. Rhode Islanders reflected the feverish trend toward a promising industry, even though the promise was to be snuffed out before the end of that decade. All around Rhode Islanders saw silk companies spring into being overnight like gossamer webs on the lawn, only to dry out under the blaze of the economic recession of 1836. Abner Brownell and John Macomber of Westport, Massachusetts were engaged in the cultivation of the Mulberry. Possibly their trees supplied raw silk for what was known as the Silk Mill on Sin and Flesh Brook, Tiverton. At Nantucket, the American Silk Company opened. Likewise did plants at Dedham and Northampton, Massachusetts, Lisbon and Mansfield, Connecticut and Concord, New Hampshire. Massachusetts, Maine and New Jersey all offered bounties either for cocoons or for raw silk. The craze spread to Kentucky, Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, Tennessee.

But the enterprise took on a different character from that known by Stiles, Franklin and Vernon. As Bishop wrote, "Large profits were made by the sale of the young plants . . . and many were induced to engage in the 'silk business', as it was called, and which a few years after degenerated into a mere speculation in trees, to the permanent discredit of silk raising in the United States."<sup>16</sup> Specifically, trees bought for less than \$1,000 sold for over \$12,000. Not even improved techniques of winding could save the industry, and finally even the promoters grew disenchanted. By 1840 the silk craze had fizzled.

Perhaps the best explanation of its failure came from what that outsider, Peter Kalm of Sweden, had observed in the 1740's, namely that "labor was so expensive in this country, and the raising of sorts of grain, hemp and flax, as well as tobacco, did not require nearly so much care as the feeding of silk worms."

Has silk culture a future in Rhode Island? The answer to that may come from Newport Restorations Foundation, Inc. The age-old practice of setting out the Mulberry trees is under consideration at the Prescott Farm in Portsmouth.

15 Coleman, Peter J. **The Transformation of Rhode Island, 1790-1860.** Providence, Brown University Press. 1963; 117.

16 Bishop, J. Leander. **A History of American Manufactures from 1608 to 1860.** Philadelphia, Edward Young. II; 391.