

"COVENTRY -- OUR TOWN - 1741-1941."

By Miss Ardis W. Barbour

Because of the inspiration I received several years ago from Prof. Mildred E. Bassett while I was a student under her tutelage at the Rhode Island College of Education, I had the enthusiasm to write a historical sketch on the Town of Coventry in conjunction with Coventry's Bi-Centennial Celebration held in August 1944. Prof. Frank Greene Bates, formerly of Coventry and now of Bloomington, Indiana, wrote on "How Coventry Came to Be", beginning with Samuel Gorton and his associates and their purchase of the lands of Shawomet from Miantonomi, the Narragansett Indian Chief and leading up to the time when Coventry was separated from Warwick and incorporated into a township in 1741. My story, "Coventry, Our Town - 1741 to 1941" continued from where Prof. Bates ended his paper.

In relating some of the interesting facts of Coventry's history, I cannot do so without first giving recognition to those who so kindly assisted me in compiling the information which I have - namely: Mr. Charles A. Keller, Mr. Herbert F. Paine, Mr. and Mrs. George A. Foster and the late Dr. R. Morton Smith.

Mrs. Edwin H. Arnold has told me that, at the meeting held last fall in Greene, she told you of the incorporation of Coventry following its separation from Warwick and of the early boundaries and highways, so I will not dwell upon those topics, but rather on the villages and settlements within the Town.

COVENTRY became a township following its incorporation in 1741 after it was set apart from Warwick by the Purchasers who were partners in the great landed estate which had been acquired from Chief Miantonomi. A petition presented to the General Assembly praying for a new township and stating the difficulties which they encountered because of distances they had to travel to town meetings and to transact the business of the Town was signed by Preserved Hall, George Hall, Thomas Welch, Peleg Spencer, Amos Stafford, Jr., Elisha Johnson, George Rice, Andrew Barton, William Bates, and Charles Andrews. Perhaps several of you are descendants of one or more of these Town founders! The General Assembly voted in favor of the petition and Coventry became a town, bearing its name for Coventry in England, an important city in Warwickshire. The new Coventry extended from what is now West Warwick to the Connecticut state line, containing about sixty square miles, becoming larger than its mother town in area, but of a more sparse population. It is of interest to note that Coventry's population has steadily increased since its incorporation. Today Coventry remains the largest town in area in our fair State, is centrally located -- the geographical center of the State being located near the West Warwick line, and still has a large industrial area in the eastern end of the Town concurring with the 1741

adventurers who found Coventry a "well-watered town." Their awareness of the abundant water power found here led them to erect the grist mills and lumber mills along the banks of the rivers, thereby providing food for themselves and lumber for their houses. Later, industrialists took advantage of the water power in Coventry and erected factories along the streams. Villages sprang up around the factories. The Pawtuxet River with its south branch has been an outstanding asset to our town. People with manufacturing ideas, set about to utilize the water power offered and more factories were built up and down the banks of the rivers, thereby calling more settlers to Coventry and adding more settlements. At one time, it is said, Washington alone could boast of six separate enterprises located along the banks of the river, namely: The Washington Manufacturing Co., the Kilton Mill, the Hines and Arnold Machine Shop, the James Mill, the Benjamin Moone Mill, and the Flannagan Mill. With the passing of the years, these mills named are gone, but others have taken their places and are providing employment for many people. A look at a map of our Town would show that the northeastern and central parts are largely manufacturing sections while the remainder is rural. J. Earl Clauson once wrote that "Coventry has its feet deep in the manufacturing furrow while its head and shoulders are exposed to the country air."

Now let us look at the early settlements and villages of the Town. I have stated that most of them began with mills -- either grist or saw, or both. We shall speak about their further developments to continue our story.

### WASHINGTON

WASHINGTON was formerly known as Brayton, Braytown Town, Braytonville. The early settlers in the village were called "Braytonians." Francis and Thomas Brayton migrated from the Island of Rhode Island to what is now Washington. On the opposite banks of the river, about 1765, each built a grist mill near where the bridge is now. Thomas Brayton later conducted a fulling mill and saw mill. In 1810 Peleg Wilbur, George Arnold, and others established the Washington Manufacturing Company and the village name was changed to Washington. This company built the first cotton mill here around 1812. The mill burned in 1826. Caleb Kilton and John Bissell were shareholders in the company. A saw, grist, and calendaring mill and a tavern were also burned in the same fire. A stone factory was built immediately to replace the one destroyed. This mill was for many years owned by the Livingston Worsted Company and was torn down in 1935 after being sold to the Stillwater Worsted Company. The brick mill was erected in 1914 and is owned and operated by the Stillwater Worsted Co. Woolen goods are manufactured there.

At one time in Washington there were six distinct and separate enterprises along the river in which there were three dams constructed. Hines and Arnold operated a machine shop, about 1813, and made machinery

for factories down through the Pawtuxet Valley. This shop made Washington a lively little village. This shop was likewise burned, perhaps about 1885.

In about 1858 the Rev. Benjamin Moone purchased a mill opposite where the fire station now stands. It was called the Moone Mill. Carpet warps and twine were manufactured there. The mill was burned in 1907. The Washington Methodist Church, one of the old New England type, was built in 1831. The first post office in the Town of Coventry was located in Washington and it was known as Coventry Post Office. Oliver Wilbur was the first postmaster.

Washington is the governmental center of the town and has been since the erection of the Town Clerk's Office in 1881. Previous to the existence of this building, the town records were kept in the basement of a building in Washington owned by John Chace, now known as Duffy's Market.

One of the very old houses in the town is owned by Mr. Herbert Paine. It stands next to the fire station. This house was known as the Holden Tavern. A sign which hung over the door way of the tavern and which is now in the possession of Mr. Paine is most interesting. It reads as follows: "1801--Entertainment for travelers and good stabling for horses by A. Holden." Mr. George Foster believes that this house stood in 1668 and survived the Indian burnings and Mr. Paine corroborates the story. The house was originally much smaller than it is today and one part of it was once a school room, it is believed. Mr. Holden's famous barbecues, to which people came from afar, were held at this place when one of the fireplaces, now enclosed in the house, stood out in the open. The pigs were turned on a spit in the fireplace.

A noted tavern in its day stood on the Newell property. It was known as the Brayton tavern and was owned by Benjamin Brayton. The building was torn down in 1898.

### ANTHONY

ANTHONY was once called Quaker Village. The Quakers erected a meeting house here on what is now called Meeting Street.

About 1808 William and Richard Anthony built a cotton mill along the banks of the river and the village became known as Anthony. The water privilege was purchased from Jacob Greene brother of Nathanael Greene. The machine shop of Perez Peck was built in 1810 by the Coventry Company and rented to Mr. Peck, a Quaker, who with Mr. Sisson made looms there which bore the name of Sisson looms. Searles Capwell operated a planing and turning mill in Anthony for many years.

The Coventry Company purchased the Anthony mill and built a new mill around 1872 which is now operated by the Berkshire Fine Spinning Co., makers of fine cotton cloth.

Charles Greene had a boot and shoe shop which stood near the common. It was a place where the first men of the town met evenings and discussed business, political, and important questions of the times.

The Knotty Oak Baptist Church early known as the Coventry Six Principle Baptist Church was established in 1840. It received the name "Knotty Oak" from the fact that a large oak tree stood near the Church.

At one time a paper mill stood on the banks of the river. It was named Coventry Paper Works. Rice straw was used in making the paper. The business, however, had a short existence.

### QUIDNICK

Stephen Taft opened a print works in this section and it bore the name of Taftville, Taft's or Taft Factory. The small houses in Quidnick today are supposed to have been built by the Tafts.

Later Amasa and William Sprague bought the mill and the village was named Quidnick. The name was taken from the Quidnick Reservoir which stored the water for the mills. Cotton cloth was manufactured by the Spragues. The old Sprague Store, erected in 1849, is now known to us as Moore's Garage.

The old Tin Top church was a very well known Church near and far in former days. Its steeple was covered with tin, hence the name, Tin Top. The original building was framed in Providence, rafted down the river to Apponaug, and drawn from there by team to Quidnick. The land for the Church was given by Mr. Jacob Greene. After the building was erected in 1808, many people came to attend religious services. Now the one time Tin Top Church is the home of the St. Mary's Parochial School.

### BLACKROCK

BLACKROCK, situated between Anthony and Arkwright, is so named for the huge dark colored rock there. Fones Greene owned a farm in this section in 1814. Fones Pond was named for Mr. Greene. William Greene, Samuel Greene, W. F. Greene, William Greene, Jr., and Jeremiah Greene, manufactured cotton cloth there under the name of Black Rock Manufacturing Co. The old mill was built in 1814. It was later used as a machine shop in 1824 and then as a broom factory. The house of Fones Greene, built in 1814, is still standing, and is known as the Charles Stone House.

### ARKWRIGHT

ARKWRIGHT was once called Remington's Run, for the Remington family owned much land in the vicinity about 160 years ago. A saw mill and a grist mill were erected near the bridge in Arkwright by James Burlingame and the settlement became known as Burlingame mills. The

name Arkwright was taken from the name of Richard Arkwright, an English inventor and millwright, when the Arkwright Mill was built in 1810. The chimney of the mill remains today.

Below the dam in Arkwright was built a picker house where cotton was prepared for carding. The Arkwright Finishing Company is engaged in business there. The Interlaken Mills make book binding cloth in Arkwright today.

### HARRIS

Caleb Atwood built a stone mill after the war of 1812, probably in 1813, and named it Atwood's Mill. This was a cotton factory and was called "Dumplin' Mould". Elisha Harris, who later became Governor of the State, bought the farm where the village of Harris now stands, from Nathan Potter, secured the water privilege, built a dam, and dug a trench to carry the water from the pond to his factory which he built in 1823. There he manufactured heavy cotton sheetings. In the beginning of his business, he maintained a grocery store in one end of his mill for the benefit of his employees. The village was named Harrisville.

The Pearce Brothers Woolen Mill operated by Joseph, George, and John Pearce, is now standing in Harris. It was a stone mill and is now a part of the Pawtuxet Valley Dyeing Co. The woolen mill was in operation about fifty years ago.

The Nicholas Top Roll Covering Co., first operated by Wellington Nicholas, then by his son, Sylvester, and later by Lewis Bowen, then by his son, Walter Bowen, and now by Walter Bowen's daughter, Mrs. F. Richmond Allen, was later called Harris Mills, and the Village is called Harris today. In 1883 the Interlaken Mills were established and are in operation today manufacturing cotton cloth.

The Elisha Harris House, spoken of as the "Mansion House," has been the home of two Governors of the State of Rhode Island, - Gov. Harris and Gov. Howard who married the daughter of Gov. Harris.

The Elder Tatern Meeting House which was built in 1829 is now a dwelling house in Harris. It was the first Church building in the vicinity and stood at one time where the Phenix Methodist Church now stands.

The LeValley, Lanphear Machine Shop was a very extensive manufactory of its kind in the village. The concern, known as the LeValley, Lanphear & Co., was composed of: Robert LeValley, Thomas Lanphear, Elisha Harris, and Giles Spencer. The shop was built in 1846 and the company continued in business until 1871, or thereabouts.

### COVENTRY CENTRE

The settlement in the centre of the town is Coventry Centre, but it has been known by other names: Shoethread, Central and even Central Factory.

As early as 1750, there was a saw mill and a grist mill and it is said they were blown down in the gale of 1815. Israel Wilson bought the land from Joseph Weaver and operated a grist mill and a fulling mill. The pond was sold and the original fourteen acres of land of Joseph Weaver were also sold to Quidnick Reservoir Company who enlarged the ponds for a mill water supply.

When the land under this pond was merely a bog or a swamp, it was referred to as Maroon Swamp and occasionally one hears a long-time resident of Coventry speak of it as such. The men's boots were covered with red mud after the men had walked through the swamp which they had occasion to do. From this red-colored mud came the name Maroon Swamp. When it was determined that the mud contained iron, the bog iron-ore was dug out of the swamp and smelted in a forge nearby which was in operation around 1790, in Coventry Centre.

Lowry Arnold built the first cotton mill in this section in 1809. Thomas Whipple manufactured there in 1845 and Pardon Peckham went into the manufacturing business in 1848. He erected a mill in 1859. This village was the seat of the Peckham Manufacturing Company, which at one time owned two mills at Coventry and one at Spring Lake. Cloth and yarn were manufactured. Members of the Gillespie family have owned the mills and many of the houses for several years. The manufactories there now consist of lace and braids.

Mr. Peckham erected a number of tenement houses, a public hall and a general store. The public hall erected in about 1853 was a meeting place for the people, and preachers of different denominations held services there.

### WHALEY

Thomas Whaley was the original settler of Whaley which is now called Potterville. Mr. Whaley, a descendant of Theophilus Whaley, built a saw mill there and operated it. The town of Coventry erected a "commodious" Town House in Whaley in 1835. The site was near the Waterman Tavern, and that may be the reason for the location of the new Town House, as the early town meetings and elections were held in the tavern.

### BOWEN'S HILL

The first of the Bowen family, for whom the hill and settlement were named, to establish residence there was Aaron Bowen who came from Tiverton in 1740.

### SUMMIT

Summit's name came from the fact that it is on the ridge between the water sheds of the Flat River and the Moosup River. It was customary to speak of Summit as Summit Station, for the railroad, in passing through the place, helped its growth as well as that of others along the line. The depot was built in 1856 and Mr. Nichols built a general store in the same year. A public hall was erected by Mr. G. M. Nichols in 1888 and stands today as Nixon's Hall. In 1812 James Matteson had a saw mill near Summit. Leonard Matteson had a saw mill and a shingle mill. Albert Johnson was the village blacksmith for a long time. The Church was erected in 1867.

### GREENE

Greene became a settlement after the railroad went through the locality and set up a stopping place. The depot was built in 1856 or thereabouts and the growth of the village followed. It was given the name of Greene by the railroad company in honor of General Nathanael Greene.

In 1867 Whipple Phillips erected a saw mill, shingle mill, planing mill and then a box factory. For many years Camp Meeting has been held there during the summer. People came from miles around to attend services on "Big Sunday" and to meet their acquaintances whom they might not see at any other time during the year. It was truly a "big" day for all.

Acetic acid, used in dyeing and bleaching, was made in Greene, at one time. During the first World War an experimental station was conducted there.

A sketch about Greene would not be complete without speaking of the cranberry business there. In 1728 the Great Grass Pond Cedar Swamp covered about 112 acres and the land around it contained valuable cedars. Following the cutting of the trees, it is believed that the pond gradually dried up and wild cranberry vines spread over it. Since the cranberries grew in abundance, there has been more or less dispute over the ownership, in times gone by, of the swamp. Following one controversy, the town of Coventry appointed a committee in 1853 consisting of Peleg Andrews, Squire Wood, and Oliver Lewis to take possession of the pond for the town and to have the same surveyed. This they did, and made the following agreement as the town's agents: that William Capwell, Jr., and Willard Capwell agree that "they will at the proper time gather the cranberries

growing on Great Grass Pond, deliver one-half part, in same condition as when gathered, to the agents at the house of either or at the cranberry bog, as they shall think proper, shall see to and take proper care of the cranberries, until ripe enough to be gathered, and that they will mow as much of bog as they shall think proper, the hay so cut to belong to the Capwells in consideration for the care and oversight." So, the Town of Coventry was once in the cranberry business. In 1862 the town sold the bog at public auction to Abiel Sampson, including all its interest therein.

### FAIRBANKS

About 1800 Thomas Blanchard built and operated a saw and a grist mill and later ran a carding and a fulling mill. Mr. E. G. Fairbanks bought the business in 1825 and the section became known as Fairbanks. The name is still in use today, for the corner nearby is called Fairbanks Corner.

Col. McGregor, who was commander at the execution of Maj. Andre, kept a tavern west of Fairbanks. His son, Jeremiah, came into possession of the business after the death of his father and he hung out a temperance sign. The tavern became known as the first temperance tavern in the town, something unusual in that day.

Dr. John McGregor, a surgeon in the Civil War, resided in this section. The old McGregor Mansion, containing many relics was burned down about fifty years ago.

### HOPKINS HOLLOW

HOPKINS HOLLOW, south of Greene, was first settled by Capt. Rice who built a grist mill and a saw mill and the first house there. Then it was known as Rice's Mills. It is now a part of the Arnold Farms. In 1825, Jeremiah Hopkins and son, Samuel, erected a mill there and the place became Hopkins Hollow.

### RICE CITY

RICE CITY, on the Plainfield Pike, was named for Samuel Rice. Because of its location on one of the principal thoroughfares, it was early a place of lively merriment in the days of the overland stage coaches. It is said that one tavern after another lined the highway where travelers could recuperate from the day's journey, and find rest and entertainment. The railroad changed it all and Greene Station became the place of excitement. The Rice Tavern is still standing today. There was a toll gate in the vicinity of Rice City.



### SPRING LAKE

SPRING LAKE had its beginning in 1818 when Ezra Ramsdell built a mill for making warps. The mill was burned in 1830 and Christopher Whitman purchased the land and erected a mill for manufacturing cotton yarns. In 1865 Thomas Peckham and Co. purchased and improved the mill. Later the Peckham Manufacturing Co. took Thomas Peckham in company and they operated the mill until Pardon Peckham and his son took over the business. At one time the company employed as many as 115 workers. Knitting yarns and stocking yarns were made. Several of the mill houses stand today, though the mill was burned in 1906 and was never replaced. The business remains a part of Coventry's history like many others already mentioned. At the time of the Whitman ownership the settlement was called Whitman Yard, later known as Peckham, and even referred to as Skeetersville.

### READ DISTRICT

READ DISTRICT was named for the Read family. The section was a farming district. Today just above the school house, stands a chimney. Here was the Thomas Arnold Acid Works. Acid was made from birch and maple wood and used in the printing of calico.

### PLEASANT VALE OR BARCLAY

At the Arnold Farm in the Tiogue section, there stood a rope walk about 1080 feet long. It is said that, during the Spanish-American War, a long anchor rope was needed and that this rope walk was the only place that could make a rope of the required length. The Anthonys, Jabez, William and Edward manufactured there and so did Fones Potter and Peck & Hammond. This centre bore the names of Pleasant Vale and Barclay. Bandings and cords were made there, also.

I feel that I should be very neglectful in telling Coventry's history if I did not mention a few of Coventry's most historic buildings.

### NATHANAEL GREENE HOMESTEAD:

This building, often referred to as the "Mount Vernon of Rhode Island", was built by Nathanael Greene in 1770 and to it he took his bride to dwell. Nathanael resided there until he joined the Continental Army in 1775. The house was used as a convalescent hospital for officers during the Revolutionary War. The house remains today as a historic shrine, preserved and maintained by the Trustees of the General Nathanael Greene Homestead Association. Visitors are welcome.

### THE WATERMAN TAVERN

The Waterman Tavern, a famous tavern in Coventry, not only served as a place for town meetings and elections, but was a tavern in the real sense of the word, according to the day. The tavern dates back to about 1750. It has many spacious rooms, still has the flag hearthstones, several fireplaces, one of which is very interesting and large enough to hold logs of cord-wood length, doors with hand-forged hinges and hand-wrought latches. Stage-coaches were run over this line past this tavern until near 1856. It has been known as the Stafford Tavern, and Gorton Tavern, and, I am told, has also been known as the Whaley Tavern. This building is historically important, too. One historian states that in this tavern "important matters to the nation were decided." Gen. Lafayette and Counte de Rochambeau, it is said, met here and conversed concerning the coming of the French Troops to Rhode Island. These troops were landed in Newport, from there they journeyed to Bristol, then to Providence, and stayed over night in what is now Hayward Park. The next day they passed through Knightsville, then called Monkeytown, then over the road which led from Cranston over the Hope-Furnace Road and on to the Turkey Meadow Road to the Waterman Tavern. In the field across the road from the tavern, the French soldiers camped. This was in June of 1781. The field is known to this day as the French Camping Ground. Wells were dug to supply the soldiers with drinking water and the wells are in existence today. On one of the fireplace mantels in the house there is a cut said to have been made by one of the officers, quartered in the tavern, when he struck at a younger officer and missed the man, thereby cutting a gash in the mantel about five inches long. Due to the mantel's having been refinished many times, the deepest part of the scar now is only about two inches long. The soldiers also stayed here on their return march in November 1782. A spring in the rear of the tavern, where it is said that Lafayette quenched his thirst on a hot day in June, now bears the name of Lafayette Spring.

### MAPLE ROOT CHURCH:

MAPLE ROOT CHURCH was organized around 1762. An early Church was probably erected across the road from where the present building now stands. In 1797 a new "Meeting House" was built, the same being in use today. It is said that the membership at one time was nearly six hundred. The name "Maple Root," according to tradition, came from the fact that a maple tree had blown down and lay with its roots extending in such a manner that they served as a bridge for the purpose of crossing the river.

COVENTRY has had many witnesses to its history-making epochs which, in their turn, have added to Coventry's development and made this Town what we know it to be today. With the passing of the years there

came the railroads; the Hartford, Providence and Fishkill with its wood-burning engines, the N. Y., N. H. & Hartford, the Pawtuxet Valley Branch and now the near extinction of railroad service, the livery stables, the blacksmith and wheel-wright shops, the old bobbin shops, the coming and passing of the electric-cars, having given way to more competent bus service in line with motor transportation; many of us have watched our familiar berry pastures develop into lake resorts which are leaning toward new communities in our town; we have seen new and thriving industries enter and provide new means of livelihood for our fast growing population.

All, in their turn, have brought accompanying prosperity in their time and we, who are proud to call Coventry "our home town" look forward to greater advancement for the benefit of our citizenry.