



BY THE OLD MILL STREAM. Ruins of old "Frenchtown Village" today. Only some sturdy foundation stones, green with age (left), mark site of first cotton mill in town of East Greenwich, established by Deacon Pardon Tillinghast on Hunt's River, 1814.

Photo by Edward C. Hanson

# A 'Ghost Village' Without Ghosts

BY ROBERT L. WHEELER

**E**ARL W. BROWN of Tillinghast Road, East Greenwich, owns 100 acres of woodland and a jeep. One day a couple of years ago, not long after he purchased the property and started to build, he set out to "beat the bounds" in his puddle-jumper.

Not far down Tillinghast Road from Mr. Brown's homesite on Sawmill Hill a narrow trail takes off from the pave. You have to rough-ride it in a jeep to appreciate it. The lane winds and twists and the jeep bounces from stump to boulder and gets its face slapped by indignant little tree branches and saplings. Birds twitter and chipmunks curse. After a kidney-jolting ten minutes the brush thins out and the trail ends in a clearing. That's where you leave the jeep and go exploring afoot. It's also where Mr. Brown's property ends.

Cross the clearing and you come to the brow of a hill overlooking a silver pond and a massive stone dam whose granite blocks are green with age. Over it, water trickles. At one side is a sluiceway lined with quarried stone. Follow it and you find yourself, as Mr. Brown did, in a Deserted Village.

"You can imagine how I felt," he said, pointing to sagging buildings overhanging a traceable Main Street and approached by flights of massive steps. "I had no idea in the world I was living next door to anything like this."

In 1814 the industrial epidemic which wrecked the Yankee agricultural economy and put all the New England brooks to work turning mill wheels was at fever pitch in Rhode Island. Within a radius of 30 miles of Providence, spindles whirred in 140 factories. The efficient British blockade of the American coast was

building an American manufacturing system. And of that system the ruins off Tillinghast Road were once a part.

Not even church deacons were immune from the urge to make money supplying Americans with native products. Deacon Pardon Tillinghast, a pillar of the Seminary Baptist Church, East Greenwich, owned a swamp meadow on Hunt's River in the Frenchtown area. He conceived the idea of making his chunk of bogland pay off. So he dammed the stream and built the first cotton factory in the town of East Greenwich.

**T**HE stone came from the Tarbox Ledge at Carr's Pond a few miles away and was probably quarried by Tarbox men, who have been stonecutters since time immemorial. The blocks are beautifully cut and fitted. The mill was four stories high, the first two of stone, those above of wood. Later there were additions on all four sides. Today only the foundations remain of what was known for years as the Tillinghast Factory. They say that one of the stones bears the date "1814" but neither Earl Brown nor I could find it.

The mill contained perhaps half a dozen spindles and tradition says that at first the yarn spun on them was woven into cloth on hand looms in the farmhouses roundabout. Only six people were employed in the mill and the deacon built houses for them—small, solid houses with stone foundations and great granite doorsteps. A few years ago Henry Fessenden, who owns the land where the "ghost village" is located, strolled down by the old mill stream one day and found a perspiring chauffeur trying to pry one loose with a crowbar. Said the boss wanted it for his country place in South

County. Make a nice doorstep to carry a bride over. Henry says he wasn't making much progress.

The Deacon put in a gigantic water wheel 28 feet in diameter, five feet across at the floats. It reached away up through three stories of the Tillinghast Factory. When it was going full tilt in summer you could hear the splashing as far away as Frenchtown Road. Made more noise than the mill machinery. On winter mornings the Deacon's mill wheel was a kind of weather report.

"How cold is it, husband?"

"Real cold. You don't hear her, do ye? Creek must be friz so hard they're havin' to chop the ice away from the floats."

"B'r'r."

"Never mind. Git up. You'll hear her start in a minute."

Deacon Tillinghast made quite an effort to give the Frenchtown section of East Greenwich a manufacturing center. The little village which sprouted in the gully east of Tillinghast Road grew to include a blacksmith shop and a store. After it got so there weren't any more housewives who knew how to spin and weave, looms were installed. You wouldn't think it now but there was a time when big wagon trains actually moved over that woodland trail Earl Brown can just about negotiate today in a jeep. The raw stock came over the road from East Greenwich or Providence.

After a few years the Deacon turned the Tillinghast Factory over to his sons, Allen and Joseph, who let the mill to various operators. Among the early manufacturers were William Pinniger, a man named Fay, Joseph Briggs, and Elder Lapham. In 1849 the



IN 1915, when this picture was taken, mill had "gone from the stream" but buildings of little hamlet were still standing. Hunt's River once supplied water power for seven other mills.

## Deacon Tillinghast dammed his bog in western East Greenwich and built a mill. A hamlet grew up. But it's all gone wild now.

property was sold to Thomas Holden and Joseph Card. Holden sold his interest to Zachariah Parker, Parker sold out to Giles Spencer, and after Card sold to A. Lyman Place, Spencer & Place did a fairly profitable business in print goods.

It was really the Civil War that licked the little mill in the gully. You can't make money with cotton at \$2 a pound. So the mill closed down and when it opened up again they took the Deacon's big wooden mill wheel out and put in an iron one. Later this was replaced by water turbines. When World War II opened up there were two down there in the gully, but there's only one there now and Henry Fessenden won't tell you where it is. The one he tells you about is gone. Henry came down one afternoon and found a junkman welting it with a sledge hammer, trying to break it up. Mr. Fessenden didn't sympathize with him like he did with the chauffeur who was trying to steal the doorstep. He called the police.

Some weeks later the whole turbine was gone. Someone came and did a real engineering job; put up a shears and h'isted her right out of the creek onto a truck.

IN the 1870's the mill was sold to Benjamin Moon. The manufacture of print cloth was abandoned at the start of the decade and the machinery changed over to make carpet warp and twine. That's when it dropped the name of the Tillinghast Factory and became known as the Moon Mill.

Benjamin Moon ran his twine mill successfully for a number of years. Following his death in 1905, his son, Benjamin Moon 2nd, and the latter's half

brother, Harris Moon, operated it just long enough to run off the stock on hand. In 1907 the mill was sold to Henry McMahon of Washington, who carted away what was left of the machinery and used the lumber to build a barn.

There were never more than half a dozen dwelling houses in "Frenchtown Village" but the place had a kind of village integrity all the same. Any place where people work and live has that and it sometimes lasts a long time. There are grapes growing back of some of the ruins and they aren't wild grapes either.

You'd almost think a Ghost Village rated at least one ghost but this one hasn't a single one. The only ha'nts are the jolly mushroom-picking commandos who swarm through Earl Brown's and Henry Fessenden's woods in the fall of the year, usually smoking cigarettes in a very gay and carefree manner. It's doubtful if Deacon Pardon Tillinghast ever comes back to look things over. He had a good idea anyway — some of the people living where they worked and the womenfolks keeping the hand looms running in their homes.



RUINED DWELLINGS of old mill village line grass-grown Main Street deep in woodland.

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