

LOCAL DISTILLERIES

John Dyer, died at his residence in Providence at 11 Charles Field Street, March 16, 1896. He was 90 years old and was the last old-time distiller in Providence, and probably in the State. Since 1863, when he retired from business, he had no successor, and the old distilleries, which formerly stood on the present site of the works of the Providence Tool Company, and on Wickenden Street are, with the historic still house located at Pawtuxet in Revolutionary times, nothing but memories, forgotten by all except the antiquarian and the old inhabitants.

With the great India trade done by the Providence merchants before and after the Revolution, and the extensive traffic in slaves from the African Coast carried on from Rhode Island ships up to within the last half century, it would be naturally supposed that several distilleries would be located in the city, to furnish New England rum, used in exchange for slaves. But the records are meager and few of these establishments can be uncovered even with diligent research. New England rum was a staple article of commerce in the early part of the century, and it was said that the Providence distilleries made good liquor, even for those days! One gallon of molasses produced one gallon of rum, the wholesaler sending the casks of molasses to the distillery and receiving a few days later his product of the sugar cane in the form of rum. The distiller was paid his commission and everyone was satisfied.

Great quantities of rum were used by the Providence skippers in the slave trade. The slave pens at Fox Point were well filled all times and to get these slaves, large quantities of rum were necessary, as well as the gew-gaws which attracted the fancy of the savages. Rum was not then regarded as it is now, and at funerals, feasts, house raisings and all public affairs a cask was broached and the liquor was as free as water. The man who refused or neglected to provide liquor at a house raising or any other affair in which the neighbors gave their services, was considered niggardly and mean, and the workmen often stipulated that they were to receive their rations of rum with their board.

Rum was a regular household article, and even ministers and deacons of the church took their toddy every day. The small boy in the family was usually, if he had behaved himself, given the glass and allowed to eat the sugar remaining in the bottom. At last, however, public opinion ran against the extent to which the drinking was carried on, and a violent reaction set in. Temperance meetings were held all over the country, and feeling in some places ran high between the reformers and the advocates of the old order of things.

The first temperance movement in Providence was in April 1827, when a public meeting of citizens friendly to the cause was held in the First Baptist Meeting House. Resolutions were passed, and other meetings were held, after which the reform slumbered until the temperance craze swept the country in 1840 and the following years.

At that time there were formed the "Rhode Island State Total Abstinence Society" founded Jan. 5, 1841 and numbering, in December 1842, 30,000 members. The "City Temperance Society" formed Nov. 1, 1836 with 1380 members: the "Young Men's Washington Total Abstinence Society," formed July 8, 1841, with 230 members: The Providence Washington Total Abstinence Society," formed July 8, 1841 with 3085 members, the "Sixth Ward Washington Total Abstinence Society," formed April 8, 1842 with 300 members and the "Maine Washington Total Abstinence Society," formed Aug. 29, 1842 with 50 members. The population of the city in 1830 was 16,892, but it is supposed that there were some inhabitants who did not belong to one of these societies.

But before the temperance movement had arisen, and at the time when the town of Medford was becoming famous for the quality of the spirits distilled there, several distilleries were in operation in Rhode Island, Still House Cove, at Pawtuxet, where the club house of the Rhode Island Yacht Club is situated, gained

its name from the still house operated there in pre-revolutionary times. The site of the old still house was in the bend of the shore, which here describes an arc of a circle, and a flowing spring of pure water was located at the rear. All traces of the old distillery, which was more of a historic landmark than any of the others, have long since been swept away by the hand of time, but 150 years ago the walls were still standing although in a crumbling condition, and the walled-up spring still discharged its waters. The spring at that time contained trout, and the ruins were pointed out to visitors and justly regarded as one of the landmarks of Pawtuxet.

In the stirring times in the colony preceding the Revolution, the still house was operated by a Tory, whose adherence to his royal master gave much offence to the freemen and seafaring men of Pawtuxet, which then enjoyed commercial advantages nearly equal to Providence. The village was a summer resort for Providence, and the main street was lined with fine old mansions, some of which are still standing to this day. The wharves of Pawtuxet were lined with vessels, owned and manned by Pawtuxet men, and the name of the village, which was settled 331 years ago, five years after Providence was founded, was well known in the India and China trade.

The old graveyards around the quaint village are filled with slate gravestones marking the last resting place of Pawtuxet skippers, the stones in some instances marking empty graves, where the bodies of the dead are on the bottom of the ocean. Wharves decayed years ago, when the trade of the village was diverted to Providence in the Revolutionary War, and the last warehouse was torn down many years ago. Even the old mill at the falls has been gone almost 150 years and the place was quiet except in the summer time.

When such a project as the capture of the British Revenue schooner "Gaspee" was on foot, it was only natural that the Pawtuxet men should have been informed of the scheme and have sent a boatload on the trip. When the whaleboats from Providence reached Pawtuxet Neck they were joined by a boat from Pawtuxet, and the united forces moved to Nanquit, since called Gaspee Point, where the hated schooner had run ashore while chasing a Rhode Island up the river. The details of the attack, the wounding of Lieut. William Duddington and the capture and burning of the Gaspee are well known facts. So much for history. Tradition says that the British officer was carried to the house of the still house keeper who nursed him back to health. The wounded man spent the days of his convalescence in the still house, at the shores of Narragansett Bay, which commanded a fine view of the bay in either direction. Some time after that, the old Tory distiller was missed one day. The next day he did not appear at the factory and foul play was suspected. The vats of rum were drawn off, and on the bottom of one vat the searchers found the bones of the man they sought. He had been drowned in his own boiling rum and when found, had an iron weight attached to his feet and his hands were bound.

In 1826 this distillery, then in ruins, belonged to the family of Senator John H. Clark, who represented Rhode Island in the United States Senate from 1847 to 1853. Hardly anything was standing except the walls although history does not tell whether or not the suicide or murder of the old keeper impaired the quality of the rum and the amount of the sales. The last member of this family was James M. Clarke, a lawyer.

One of the earliest of the Providence distilleries was that operated by Darius Sessions, where the works of the Providence Tool Company stood. This was operated about 50 years and was ancient. The distillery was operated before Session's time by Welcome Arnold, grandfather of Lieut. Gov. Arnold, and uncle of James Arnold of New Bedford, founder of the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University. Wickenden Street was then South Main to the junction of Bridge Street and what is now South Main, below the junction of Wickenden, was then Fox Point St. The cistern in these distilleries made a convenient place to test the fire engines, and they were sometimes used for that purpose.

(To be continued)

LOCAL DISTILLERIES

(Continued from last month)

Another noted distillery in Providence was that operated by Ben Adams located near where Perkins Iron Works stood at Fox Point. This was later operated by John Dyer. It was of stone, the other being a wooden structure. Both places were favorite resorts of the small boys, as they provided splendid opportunities for play with the casks, and had a fascination because of their very nature. Adams is described as being very much of a gentleman.

John Dyer, the last of the distillers, was born in Abington, Mass. Dec. 21, 1805. He was a lineal descendant of William Dyer, who came over soon after the first voyage of the Mayflower.

After a few years Dyer removed to India Street, where he built a small wooden distillery near the Bristol Depot, where he continued in business. He was known as a kindly gentleman, proud of his family and also of the product that was sold.

All these distilleries made molasses rum, and it was called "good stuff". The liquor dealer sent his molasses there and received gallon for gallon, fair measure. The usual fee for changing the molasses into rum was three cents a gallon.

SOUTH FERRY

One hundred and seventy-eight years ago on the west side of Narragansett Bay there was a little village called South Ferry, close beside the old ferry slip where the boats from Jamestown came in. To the north was Saunderstown. Directly across the West Passage, which was about two miles wide at this point, was that interesting portion of God's foot-stool known as Dutch Island, where the United States had a fort with an immense garrison, consisting of one colored soldier. To the Southeast and south are Beaver Tail and Whale Rock lighthouse, and beyond that is the broad Atlantic. White winged vessels were constantly coming and going and ocean tugs and steamers trailed their black smoke along the horizon.

From the windows of this village many a wreck was seen. In 1893 the brig Arvesta and schooner Ethel Swift were totally wrecked. Fortunately without any loss of life. For many years the house on the hill was occupied by a family by the name of Eaton and they conducted a marine reporting station there.

For fifty years and more four large sloops sailed the waters of the Bay, east and west, and back again carrying passengers, horses, and produce between Newport and the South county mainland. Two of these plied between Jamestown and Newport and the other two between Jamestown and the village of South Ferry, which in those days was most prosperous.

Back in 1847 a small cotton mill was in active operation there, and formed the chief business of the place. Joseph Eaton and J.B.M. Potter were the owners of this mill, Mr. Eaton sold out to Mr. Potter and went West, returned and sold the fine farm on the hill to his son, Joseph Eaton, Jr. Capt. Eaton acquired an interest in 16 coasting schooners, which varied in size from 75 to 300 tons. The village was the headquarters for these vessels, and they were a boon and a blessing to these hard-working South County farmers. For Capt. Eaton used to buy their produce, and loading it on his schooners would send it west to New York or Philadelphia, or South to the West Indies. Most of this trade was in apples, potatoes and onions. And there was money in it, at a time when potatoes were \$2.50 a barrel in Rhode Island, they would fetch \$8.00 in gold in the West Indies. Five and a half dollars on a barrel of potatoes was the sum cleared by shrewd Capt. Eaton on more than one full cargo.

Nearly all of the captains of this big fleet made their homes at South Ferry, and there their wives and children remained contentedly while the gallant skippers were away sailing the briny. When a vessel of the fleet needed repairs above water, painting, calking, new sails or spars, or anything of the sort, such work was done at the Ferry. Under the supervision of Capt. Eaton. There was a sailmaking loft and a blacksmith shop, and every appliance for such work. Not infrequently, after severe storms, five or six of these trim coasters would be there at once, and the clink of

the shipwright's hammers was to be heard on the hillside as the vessels were made ship-shape again. All along that coast there were occasional wrecks and it was Capt. Eaton's practice to always buy up the remnants of the wrecked craft.

In this way he assured any number of anchors, chains, cables, spars, and sails, and any vessel which had lost an anchor and chain, or broke a boom or gaff, could find just what it needed for a substitute by putting into the Ferry and applying to Capt. Eaton. The pride of his own fleet operated by Capt. Eaton was the John Manlove. This famous vessel was familiarly called the Broad Horn by those that knew her, but in spite of this unwieldy nickname she was a record maker and breaker. She had many a quick trip to the West Indies to her credit, and many a greenback she earned for her owners. Finally the sea claimed her for its own. It was in the 1860's and 1870's that this thoroughly maritime settlement was in its palmy days. In those times there was no place in Rhode Island that could compare with it in the uniqueness of its population. There was at the head, stalwart Capt. Eaton, shipowner, farmer, store keeper and Postmaster, and twice representative of his district to the General Assembly. Then came the bluff captains who commanded their vessels as might be in port. An evening spent in the grocery store operated by Capt. Eaton would have filled an author with an inspiration equal to that of W. Clark Russell or Joseph Lincoln for there was such an opportunity to hear stories of the sea as was seldom gained.

Probably the direct cause of the breaking up of the idyllic marine village, was the scattering abroad of the fleet of vessels, was nothing more nor less than the changes in shipbuilding which began extensively in the seventies. The larger type of vessels which began to be built in the shipyards of Maine, Connecticut and New Jersey about this time made it difficult for small vessels to compete with them, and these latter depreciated in value. All this time the four big sloops were steadily sailing east and west, carrying passengers and freight from one shore of the Bay to the other. While stagecoaches afforded the means by land, travelers from Fall River and Newport who were bound for New York, generally went over this ferry. In early times the fare across was 10c. But was later increased 5c. Each sloop was capable of carrying 10 horses at one time, and 10 times that number of people. But one accident occurred. One of the sloops keeled over and capsized between Newport and Jamestown, one warm summer day, but no one was drowned. But in the 1870's when the maritime settlement at South Ferry commenced to decline, the ferry was abandoned. Since that time it was partially revived as a steam ferry boat, the Jamestown, ran between Newport and Jamestown. Several other ferry boats came later and now we have a new bridge and no ferries.

Joseph Eaton died in 1881, honored by everyone who knew him. Besides his good qualities and characteristics, he possessed one gift that made him a subject of wonder among seafaring men. This was his ability to tell the name of a vessel when she was so far off that an ordinary man could hardly make out whether she was a two or three master. Let a vessel poke her nose around the bonnet, the Captain would bring his glass to bear upon her, and from her general outlines, shape of hull and other points would identify her unerringly.

After the Captain's death the estate passed into the hands of his son, J. L. Eaton, and later became the property of a Providence business man. For 11 years J. L. Eaton had been Postmaster at South Ferry, thus making a total of 39 years that the office was held in the same family. During this time he carried the mail between his office and Jamestown, making the trips across in winter and summer, in a catboat. Anyone who appreciates the occasional playfulness of the waves in the lower part of the West Passage will agree that this is a good record. In his 24 foot catboat he would frequently be seen between Point Judith and Block Island, on the lookout for vessels in need of a pilot.

Some of the vessels that they sailed were: Rachel Jane, Fanny Fern, Nathaniel Holmes and Joseph Eaton Jr. Most of the old houses are gone and are now forgotten. The South Ferry church has been saved and services are held there in the summer. Thus another old village in Rhode Island is gone.