

Ponemah Mill: Then and Now

In the year 1866, the Ponemah Mill in Taftville, CT began construction and was a crucial part in Norwich's history. The construction of the mill lasted from 1866 to 1871 and the mill was developed into a company in 1869 as the Orrey Taft Manufacturing Company. Edward and Cyrus Taft started the whole project and they started off by purchasing the 600 acre farm on the Shetucket River, which the mill was built on. The Taft Brothers led the initial investors of the mill, who were Norwich residents, Lorenzo Blackstone, Moses Pierce, and John Fox Slater. Along with those three investors there were other investors from Rhode Island and Massachusetts and this company totaled \$1.5 million in capital stock.

John F. Slater was the president of the Ponemah Mill complex and was an incredibly generous man. In 1882, Slater donated a total of one million dollars to provide "freed slaves" with education in the south. Thirty-six colleges were presented with the funding and John F. Slater was given the Congressional Medal of Honor for what he accomplished. Slater's son, William Slater, donated the Slater Museum at the Norwich Free Academy in memory of his father on November 4, 1886.

By November of 1871, the mill commenced operation. The building was an astonishing 978 feet long, and five stories high and was known as the largest cotton mill under one roof in the world! The mill was also known to be the first mill in the United States to import Egyptian Cotton, which was then turned into ideal quality fabrics. One product the mill produced was *soisette*, which is a silky cotton used in men's furnishing and pajamas.

The mill provided a village to house the workers, which at the time were mostly made up of Irish immigrants. Sadly, the workers of the mill were soon hit hard with the depression of the

1870's, which began with the panic of 1873. The workers were being paid wages of under \$10 for a 67-hour week and that's when the workers started getting fed up. In April 1875, 1,200 employees went on strike. They couldn't afford to live since the mill owners raised rents and prices at the company store. The mill owners offered everyone who wasn't involved in the strike their jobs back, and replaced other workers with French Canadians. These French Canadians soon made up 70% of the population in Taftville.

In spite of these challenges, the mill continued to flourish, making expansions in 1884, 1902, and 1910. At the mill's peak, it hired 1600 workers and produced over 20 million yards of cloth per year! It has been said, "*among modern manufactories, Ponemah Mills ranks among the first in New England.*" But like most things, this mill came to an end and closed in 1972.

That was until 2016 when interest was renewed in the site. The mill will be turned in a \$30 million housing complex. This housing complex will potentially include a gym, a gallery, and even a resident movie theater. Work on the mill's renovation began in April of 2016, and was said to take about 14 to 18 months to complete. 121 units are being put in the northern half of the building, and the three buildings in front of the Shetucket River will be made into townhouses. This amazing structure will benefit many people with the new construction and will always have an incredible history attached to it.

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Works Cited

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