

History of Nonotuck Street, 1835 - 1891: Early Multi-Culturalism in Florence, Massachusetts

Preface

In November of 1846, the same month that the Northampton Association of Education and Industry gave up the ghost, Samuel L. Hill and his brother-in-law Edwin Eaton, laid out “Eaton’s Village Lots” on the plain up from the Mill River. Hill’s family, with nine others from the “Community” including Sojourner Truth and her three daughters, moved into or near this new development bounded by today’s Pine, Park, Maple and Main Streets. Here they staked out their post-utopian dream of a “neighborhood community.”

“Under the hill” remained seven African American and ten native Irish families living on what became Nonotuck Street after 1855. This division of Florence along ethnic and racial lines would maintain for decades. However, the institutions established by Hill and other mill owners, managers and prominent farmers “up the hill” sought to include all Florence citizens in a progressive community of expanded opportunity for all races and classes. Largely spared from the devastation of urban renewal many of Florence’s simple story-and-a-half frame mill houses survive and still convey an early industrial landscape where workers lived right next to their workplace.

Florence at this time was a place of humble but happy homes. The classes and self-styled aristocrats, now so numerous in other places were here unknown. Protestant, Catholic, Gentile, and Jew, white and black, all were invited, received, and welcomed as members of one common brotherhood. ...Nonotuck street was then the main street and the only business place of the village.

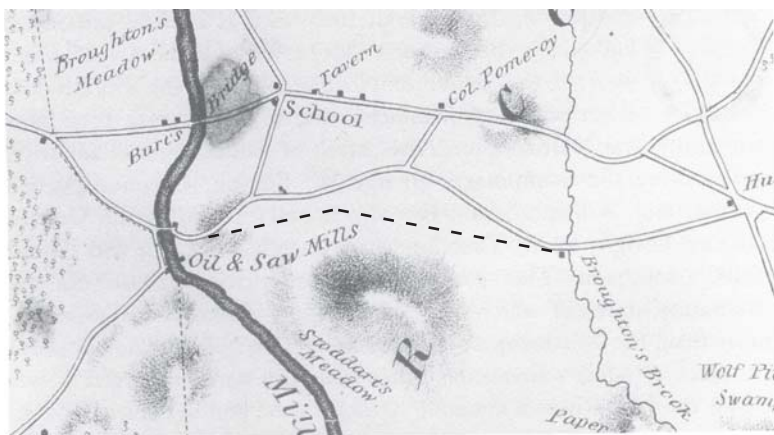
John B. O’Donnell, Fifth Mayor of Northampton



Josiah White’s Oil Mill, Samuel Whitmarsh & the Northampton Silk Company

For nearly fifty years the focal point of the farmland in Broughton’s Meadows (as Florence was known before 1842) was the oil and grist mill owned by Josiah White. In 1833, he sold the property to former New York City merchant, silk industrialist and mulberry tree speculator Samuel Whitmarsh who installed his silk manufacturing equipment in the mill. Whitmarsh arranged with the County Commissioners to extend the lower road directly to the mill from where Elm Street turned north at Joseph Warner’s silk mill. This “oil mill road” would eventually be called Nonotuck Street after the establishment of the Nonotuck Silk Company in 1855.

In 1837, Whitmarsh built a larger mill several hundred feet down river from the dam. His plan was to grow silk from scratch, that is, cultivate the mulberry trees and tediously feed the leaves to the silkworms then prepare the raw silk from cocoons for manufacture. There was a bubble of speculation in mulberry



A detail of the 1831 Northampton map shows Broughton's Meadow when there were fewer than ten houses in what was then not yet a village. The dotted line shows where the oil mill road would be built in 1835 to expedite travel to and from Samuel Whitmarsh's silk mill.

saplings, not unlike the tulip craze in seventeenth century Holland. In 1839 the bubble burst and prices fell precipitously. Whitmarsh pulled out of the company. As the Northampton Silk Company approached bankruptcy, Joseph Conant, the plant superintendent under Whitmarsh, continued to operate the plant for the stock holders who elected to sell the property, placing an ad in the *Courier and Gazette* in March of 1840.

Lydia Maria and David Lee Child

In May of 1840, the abolitionists David Lee Child and Lydia Maria Child, one of the country's leading authors, moved to Broughton's Meadows. They installed beet sugar manufacturing equipment in Josiah White's old oil mill they rented from the Northampton Silk Company. They had modest success cultivating sugar beets, an alternative to slave-grown sugar cane, on an acre of fertile land in the Meadows in Northampton. The manufacturing equipment was at that time installed in a building on Masonic Street. They won a medal for the country's best beet sugar in 1839. With money from Maria's father they bought 100

acres of land off Florence Road mostly comprised of Seeger's Swamp (Burt's Pit). The land, however, was not ready for cultivation so they rented twenty acres from the Northampton Silk Company. The experiment failed to provide a sufficient income for the Childs so Maria took a job as editor of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* in New York City in May of 1841. David stayed on the farm until around 1848 continuing the beet sugar experiment for awhile then tried to sell peat for heating fuel.

The Northampton Association of Education and Industry

How exactly a group of abolitionists from Windham County, Connecticut became aware of the availability of the Northampton Silk Company property is not certain. It is likely they heard through Joseph Conant, who continued to oversee operations at the silk mill. Conant had worked for the Mansfield (CT) Silk Company and was related by marriage to Samuel L. Hill. But David Lee Child may also have gotten word to his friend William Lloyd Garrison who passed it on to Garrison's brother-



Factory of the Northampton Silk Company completed in 1837. This would become the silk mill and boarding house of the Northampton Association of Education and Industry in 1842.

in-law George W. Benson. In any event by spring of 1841 both Hill and Benson had arrived in Broughton's Meadow. On September 14, 1841 the stockholders of the Northampton Silk Company sold the entire 470 acres, silk mill, oil and grist mill and six houses to Conant, Samuel L. Hill, George W. Benson, and William Coe. On April 8, 1842, with Coe replaced by William Adam of Cambridge, these and several other reform-minded businessmen and educators formed the Northampton Association of Education and Industry. Among the early members were David Mack from Amherst and Hall Judd, the son of Northampton editor and historian Sylvester Judd.

George W. Stetson was the son of Dolly and James Stetson who came to the NAEI in 1843 from Brooklyn, Connecticut. His recollections, given fifty years later to historian Charles Sheffield for his *History of Florence, Massachusetts*, help us imagine how the area around the mill appeared at the time.

My father, mother, and their five children joined the Community in the spring of 1843, when I was six years old. I remember distinctly our arrival at the little cottage of my uncle, George Benson. For a great many years there was a beautiful pine grove back of this cottage. Among the trees were several graves, but I do not remember the history of them. Standing at that time in the belfry of the present Braid Mill but three dwellings could be seen. To the right, towards Northampton, was the house of an Irishman, named Hickey, and this must have been seen through the forest trees, which covered the plain to a greater or less extent; to the left was the Adam house, and to the north was the Benson cottage. Our family was installed in a suite of rooms in the southeast corner on the third floor of the Community Boarding House.

The Benson cottage and Adam House were part of the property of the NAEI. The Benson cottage was moved to the intersection of Landy Avenue and Riverside Drive, probably when

Maple Street was extended to Nonotuck Street. See the difference between the 1854 and 1860 maps of Florence, on pages 14. I believe this is the house at 615 Riverside Drive. No freestanding houses are known to have been built by the NAEI during its four-and-a-half years of existence, though NAEI members Samuel L. Hill and Elsha Hammond built private homes "up the hill" in 1845.

Sheffield mentions that Nelson Askin, an African-American from Pittsfield, Massachusetts started a livery stable on Nonotuck street in 1844 the year the fugitive slave Basil Dorsey arrived in Florence. We don't know where Dorsey was living but we do know he purchased goods at the "Community" store. He may have chosen to be near David Ruggles who assisted his escape from slavery. He built his first house on Nonotuck Street in 1849. Neither Askin nor Dorsey are listed as members of the NAEI. Five other African-Americans are mentioned as being members or residing at the commune: David Ruggles, Sojourner Truth, Stephen Rush, George Washington Sullivan, and James Willson. We know of several other African American residents at the time: Sojourner Truth's three daughters stayed with their mother; Lucinda Johnson bought supplies at the store; in *Letters from an American Utopia* we hear of an "old Mr. Johnson." Most African Americans of the NAEI were living at the 1837 silk mill facing the oil mill road.



This house at 615 Riverside Drive is probably the George W. Benson cottage that sat at the foot of Maple Street and was moved to the intersection of Landy Avenue and River Road (Sheffield, p 60). This would then have been where Sojourner Truth was living when she wrote her *Narrative*.

George W. Benson & the Bensonville Manufacturing Company

In June of 1846, with the NAEI teetering on the brink of insolvency, the trustees decided to sell off 100 acres of its property, including the silk mill and the community houses on the oil mill road. The buyers were a group of evangelical abolitionists led by the brothers Samuel and John Payson Williston. John Payson had made a fortune from his invention of an indelible ink and Samuel had parlayed his wife's button making business into one of the largest fortunes in the Connecticut Valley. He founded Williston Academy in Easthampton in 1841.

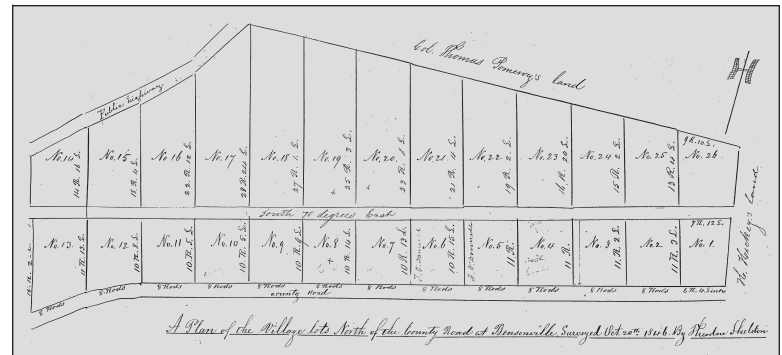
The division of NAEI property was the idea of its president, George W. Benson, who resigned to join the Willistons and Haydens as supervisor of the new cotton sheeting business to be conducted at the former silk mill. The company was at first named the Bensonville Manufacturing Company. It sectioned the property east of the factory into the Bensonville Village Lots and sold the land to workers in the their mill and others. Three of the earliest owners were African Americans from Maryland—Joseph Willson, Basil Dorsey, and Ezekiel Cooper.

It appears that Cooper, before purchasing Lot #6, actually shared Lot #4 with Willson because the 1850 census has them living next to each other each with \$300 worth of real estate.

John Payson Williston and George W. Benson made unlikely partners. Benson was a radical abolitionist like Garrison. He believed in women's rights, temperance, and nonresistance and had little faith in the political process. He had been a parishioner of Samuel J. May in Brooklyn, CT. May was one of the most progressive of the Uni-

[George W. Benson gave] employment to his colored brethren in the neighborhood, most of them fugitive slaves, and they were tenderly cared for and put on a par with other races and nationalities in that mill. In this idea he had the full support and co-operation of the other members of the company.

Obituary of George W. Benson, Hampshire Gazette, 1872



Bensonville Village Lots were laid out in October of 1846. Former slaves from Maryland, Joseph Willson and Basil Dorsey purchased lots #4 and #12. Ezekiel Cooper, also from Maryland, purchased Lot #6. Samuel Williston signed the deeds for Bensonville Mfg.

tarian clergy and his was the only Unitarian parish in Connecticut at the time. Many of his cohorts from Connecticut had “come out” from their churches, critical of how the clergy’s passivity sustained the slave power. Williston, on the other hand, was an evangelical abolitionist who believed that slavery could best be ended by working from within the church and by respecting the authority of the clergy. He actively engaged in the political process to bring the issue of slavery to the polls. Women were not intended to speak in public.

When Benson was elected president of the 1848 Anti-Sabbatarian Convention in Boston, a gathering specifically aimed at making Sunday a day legally like any other, the Willistons removed Benson from the business. While it is uncertain what other business dealings may have gone sour for Benson, he moved away from the village which bore his name late in 1850 leaving Samuel L. Hill responsible for much of his debt.

Williston continued the policy of employing fugitives:

The Negro escaping from slavery and reaching Northampton on his northward journey found a kind welcome and food, shelter and protection at the hands of Mr. Williston . . . His efforts in behalf of the runaway slaves did not cease with aiding them on their journey to freedom. If they desired to stay and work for him, he gave them a chance to labor in a cotton mill at Florence of which he was the manager and principal owner. In this mill he furnished work for the members of several colored families from the South. They lived in his tenements, near by the mill and one of the men, a Mr. Dorsey, was employed as teamster for the factory.

The 1850 Census and the Fugitive Slave Act

The 1850 federal census, taken in August, captures Nonotuck Street one month before passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. If I am correct in identifying the route of the census taker then 38 African Americans were living in seven households along oil mill road. Of the nearly 600 residents of Florence in 1850, 56 or roughly 10% were African American, a rare concentration for any small town in the North. On October 23, 1850 ten self-proclaimed fugitive slaves called for a town meeting to organize resistance to the law which had increased penalties and mandates for enforcement. (See image next page.) Five of the ten fugitive slaves lived in Bensonville—Basil Dorsey, Henry Anthony, Joseph Willson, Lewis French and William Wright. Dorsey, Willson and French lived on Nonotuck Street. By 1855 only Dorsey and Anthony remained in Florence. On October 26, 1850 Willson sold his property to his neighbor George Hill only three days after the historic meeting. Hill was the nephew of NAEI treasurer Samuel L. Hill and built his house and established an orchard across from the Bensonville Village Lots.

The Fugitive Slave Act led to an exodus of former slaves living in Massachusetts who no longer felt safe staying in their adopted home. By the time the 1855 state census was taken only

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SCHEDULE I.—Free Inhabitants in Northampton in the County of Hampshire State of Mass enumerated by me, on the 15th day of Aug 1850. Corndius S. Stone Ass^t Marshal.

District	No. of Inhabitants	Name of Person whose usual place of abode on the first day of June, 1850, was in this family.	Sex and Color			Profession, Occupation, or Trade of each Male Person over 15 years of age.	Value of Real Estate owned.	Place or Birth, Naming the State, Territory, or Country.	Married within the year.	Whether deaf and dumb, idiot, insane, blind, pauper, or convict.
			Male	Female	Color					
		Rebecca Hickey	26	F				Mass		
		Charles Reed	37	M						
419	524	Lydonas Trust	42	M		Farmer	2500			
		Compass	35	F						
		Charles H	7	M						
		Levia	5	F						
		Levidas B. West	14	M		Farmer				
420	525	Henry Hickey	45	M		"	700	Ireland		
		Margaret	37	F						
		John	15	M						
421	526	John Mahon	40	M		Farmer		Ireland		
		Mary	40	F						
		John J	10	M						
		Margaret	10	F						
		James W	1	M				Mass		
		Lawson Gough	42	M		Farmer		Ireland		
		James Mahon	40	M		Farmer				
		Richard W. Kim	25	M		Farmer				
		John	30	M						
422	527	George Hill	28	M		Farmer	5000	Mass		
		Eliza	30	F				Mass		
		Sally	47	F				Mass		
		John Smith	28	M		Farmer				
		Eliza Pittinger	30	F						
		Eliza Pittinger	28	F						
423	528	John G. Day	30	M		Farmer		Ireland		
		Ann	30	F						
		Jessie	9	F						
		Margaret	4	F				Mass		
		Public	1	M						
424	529	Joseph & Willson	42	M	B	Farmer	300	Ind		
		Margaret	55	F	B					
		John	23	M	B	Farmer				
		Edward	18	M	B	"				
425	530	Ezekiel Cooper	47	M	B	"	300			
		Levina	37	F	B					
		Elizabeth	18	F	B	Farmer				
		Benjamin	15	M	B	Farmer				
		North	9	M	B					
		Elizabeth	4	F	B			Mass		
		Thomas	2	M	B					
426	531	William Austin	50	M		Farmer				

A page from the 1850 Census. Henry Hickey's house is near the beginning of Nonotuck Street at the east. His property was just beyond Bensonville Village Lots. At the bottom of the page are listed the families of Joseph Willson and Ezekiel Cooper who were bold enough or felt safe enough to list their Maryland birthplaces.

To the Citizens of Northampton:
 The undersigned, fugitives from Southern Slavery, respectfully call your attention to the law recently enacted by the Congress of the United States, and approved by the President, which requires the officers of Government, aided and assisted by all good citizens, to seize upon, and convey back; those persons guilty of no crime, save their love of liberty, to a state of bondage worse than that existing in any part of the known world, denying its victims all social, political, and religious rights, reducing them to chattelism, and articles of merchandise, mercilessly separating families, and refusing them the Bible, and the attainment of all knowledge.

Aided and directed by a kind Providence we have effected our escape from this deplorable servitude and fled to Massachusetts for an asylum and refuge, confidently believing she would not betray the wanderer, nor deliver up the oppressed.

For our orderly, peaceful, and quiet behavior in our adopted State, we fearlessly challenge investigation; by our industry and sobriety we have many of us accumulated property, and under the free, fostering, and liberal policy of this noble commonwealth, have become citizens, and eligible to any office in the gift of the people. The enactment of this cruel and unrighteous law has thrown us into a state of alarm and consternation, for fear we may be torn from our families and friends and again doomed to a tyranny far worse than death.

We therefore respectfully invite the inhabitants of the town of Northampton, irrespective of party, or sect, to assemble in public meeting in the Town Hall, on Wednesday eve, the 23d inst, at 6:1-2 o'clock, to express their opinions and adopt such measures as they may deem proper to prevent Massachusetts from being made slave hunting ground,—the purity of the Judiciary from being soiled by legal bribes, and the public Treasury from being robbed to perpetrate these gross and enormous wrongs.

BASIL DORSEY,	JOHN WILLIAMS,
WM. C. RANDELL,	LEWIS FRENCH,
JOSEPH WILSON,	WM. HENRY BOYER,
GEORGE WRIGHT,	HENRY ANTHONY,
LOSENBERRY,	WM. WRIGHT.

Ten fugitive slaves living in Northampton, including five from Greenville (as Florence was then known) published a call to meeting to address Northampton's response to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.

Extended by 1860. Determining just where people were living west of that point presents difficulties. Deed trails lead back only as far as 1891. The Bensonville Manufacturing Company became the Greenville Manufacturing Company after Benson's departure. The company retained ownership of the houses directly across from the mill. Individual titles to the lots were not established until 1891 by which time Greenville Manufacturing was defunct. J. P. Williston's son A. Lyman Williston, Greenville's last super-

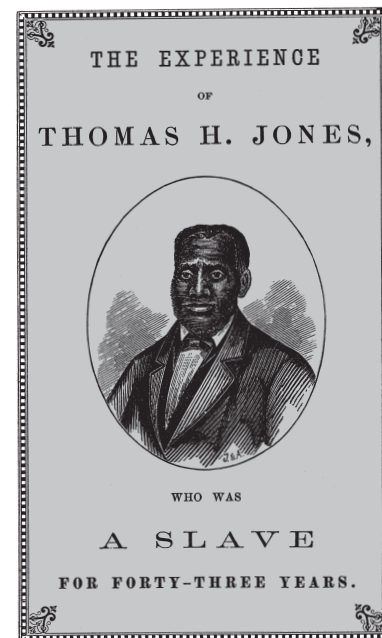
30 African Americans remained in Florence; by 1860 only 24, eleven of whom were members of Basil Dorsey's family.

The history of one house on Nonotuck marks a reversal of this trend. On April 1, 1854 Mary Jones, the wife of Thomas H. Jones, a Methodist minister and anti-slavery lecturer, bought Basil Dorsey's former house, now 191 Nonotuck. T. H. Jones escaped slavery in North Carolina in 1849, settled briefly in Salem, Massachusetts but left for New Brunswick, Canada after the Fugitive Slave Law was passed. When it became clear that few slaves were actually being sent back to slavery from Massachusetts he decided to return and took up residence in Florence.

So far we have concentrated on Nonotuck Street east of where Maple Street was ex-

tendent, inherited the assets but moved from Florence to Round Hill in 1884. He decided to sell off the property in Florence.

As the 1850 census taker moved down the street he recorded the family of Hannah Randall, a free black from Connecticut who worked at the watercure of David Ruggles. Randall would later acquire David Ruggles' house which had been moved to South Street (Florence Road) by 1852. At the end of the street living with the Askin family was Lewis French and his family and Henry and Susan Freeman.



Thomas H. Jones escaped slavery in North Carolina in 1849. He published this slave narrative in 1850 before leaving the U. S. for Canada in 1851. Between 1854 and 1859 he made Florence the home base for his anti-slavery lectures throughout the region.



Houses at 129 and 133 Nonotuck. The deeds trace back to fugitive slave Joseph Willson's ownership of Lot #4 of Bensonville Village Lots. Inspection of the construction dates the oldest sections of these houses to around the 1840's.

Basil Dorsey: Fugitive Slave, Teamster & Florence Stalwart

Basil Dorsey lived in Florence between 1844 and 1872. He was employed as teamster for the Greenville Manufacturing Company (previously the Bensonville Manufacturing Company). Dorsey escaped from slavery with his three brothers in Liberty, Maryland, in 1836 but was captured and put on trial in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, in 1837. He was released when the prosecution could not produce official documents to confirm the legality of slavery in Maryland. He traveled with abolitionist Robert Purvis first to Philadelphia and then to New York City. With the aid of David Ruggles, secretary of the New York Vigilance Committee, and Joshua Leavitt, editor of the antislavery newspaper *Emancipator*, Dorsey and his wife Louisa, steered toward Charlemont, Massachusetts, by way of Northampton.



Basil Dorsey built the house on the right on Bensonville Village Lot#12 in 1849. Now 191 Nonotuck Street, it is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The house on the left is a nice example of the several double houses along Nonotuck Street.



On March 1, 1852 Basil Dorsey purchased this house at 4 Florence Road along with nine acres land. His wife Cynthia later owned the house now at 15 West Farms road. Two other households of African Americans relocated to the area from Nonotuck Street, Hannah Randall (47 Florence Road) and Laura Knowles Washington (9 Florence Road).

He stayed temporarily with Haynes K. Starkweather on South Street. Dorsey and his wife Louisa then were taken by Captain Samuel Parsons and one of his sons to Charlemont, where he worked on the farm of Roger Leavitt, Joshua's father, for five years. After his wife's death he moved to Broughton's Meadow.

On November 12, 1849, Basil Dorsey purchased Lot #12 of Bensonville Village Lots for thirty-five dollars. On March 1, 1852, he sold the property "with the buildings thereon" to Selah Trask for eight hundred dollars. On that day Dorsey purchased close to nine acres of land "near the watercure of Dr. Chas. Munde." Munde's watercure had formerly belonged to black Underground Railroad hero David Ruggles until his death in 1849. The house currently at 4 Florence Road is the homestead Dorsey effectively swapped with Trask for the Bensonville Lot #12. Here Dorsey lived until his death on February 15, 1872. All told he had fourteen children, all of whom were living at the time a lengthy section on Dorsey was written for the *Hampshire Gazette* on April 2, 1867.

Alfred P. Critchlow, Florence Compound, & the Underground Railroad

By 1850 Alfred P. Critchlow, an English button maker recruited by Josiah Hayden, had established his own button shop on Nonotuck Street just across from where Lewis French was living. He then moved into the business of making daguerreotype cases out of Florence compound, an early plastic of his invention which would later revolutionize the brush making industry in the country. Joseph Marsh prepared a sketch of Florence's involvement in the Underground Railroad for Sheffield's *History*. Critchlow, as well as numerous other Florence residents, was a fugitive assistant:



Alfred P. Critchlow, 1813 - 1881

Among the active workers on this railroad was Mr. A. P. Critchlow. He acted in concert with Mr. Hill, Mr. Hammond, and others, and frequently gave the fugitives employment in his daguerreotype case factory. Here he did what he could to shield them and prevent recapture, and one case may not be amiss to record. A slave named French made good his escape, and sought rest in

Florence. His master, or master's half brother, a Mr. King, came to the water cure while in pursuit of the runaway. Mr. Critchlow stayed with French a few nights at the mill until King, being unable to find any trace of the slave, left Florence to seek him elsewhere.

It appears this fugitive French may well have been the man who had signed the call to Northampton's citizens to protect the former slaves living among them. Lewis French, age 28, was living with his wife Eunice, 22; Louisa, 4; Mary, 2; and William, 1 along with seven members of the Askin family and Henry and

430	31	Lewis French	28	A	B	Sharon	
		Eunice	22	F	B		
		Louisa	4	F	B		
430	311	Mary French	2	F	B		
		William	1	A	B		
507		Sarah Askin	30	A	B		
		Elizabeth	8	F	B		
		Dorcas	7	A	B		
		Leather	6	A	B		
		Janette	4	F	B		
		Lucy	2	F	B		
		Emma	2	F	B		
508		Henry Freeman	35	A	B		
		Susan	33	F	B		

For more than fifty years the Askin property marked the west end of Nonotuck Street. Here we see the Askin household in 1850, fourteen people in three families. Unlike Dorsey and Willson, who listed their southern birthplaces, Lewis French told the census taker he was born in Vermont.



Sarah Askin, 1818 - 1906

Susan Freeman—fourteen African Americans living under one roof. Eunice was the daughter of Nelson and Sarah Askin. This is perhaps rare documentation of a free born African American family providing refuge for two families of former slaves and yet Sarah Askin has never been recognized as a fugitive assistant.

We are fortunate that the 1850 census documents the numerous African American residents. In many other towns southern-born blacks were reluctant to be listed with their correct birthplace and may have avoided being listed altogether. We can only wonder whether other, more transient fugitives were moving through this neighborhood where others of their peers had appar-



With the impending development of the Nonotuck Silk Mill buildings (Pro Corp.) this smaller building behind the 1880 structures facing Nonotuck street is of particular interest. The granite lintels hint at earlier construction. This may prove to be the original A. P. Critchlow Company factory.

ently settled down. Fugitives pausing in Florence for a few days may have stayed in the homes of their white Underground Railroad “conductors” or could have been put up “under the hill” on Nonotuck Street.

In 1857, Critchlow sold his interest in the company to his partners I.S. Parsons, D.G. Littlefield and Samuel L. Hill. He went back to England for awhile then returned to Leeds and established a profitable ivory button factory.

Samuel L. Hill & The Nonotuck Silk Company

Samuel L. Hill reestablished silk operations after settling the affairs of the NAEI and dealing with the bankruptcy of George W. Benson. He began on a small scale with the help of Samuel Hinkley of Northampton. He was successful and took on partners to capitalize an expansion that became the Nonotuck Silk Company in 1855. Hill is often mentioned as a fugitive assistant and carried freedom seekers to Cummington and Whately in his wagon. It is not known whether he, like Benson, Williston, and Critchlow employed fugitives in his factory. In any event here was another workplace on Nonotuck Street run by a man active in anti-slavery. We have yet to establish whether or not the two



Stockholders of the Nonotuck Silk Company, Samuel L. Hill, seated second from left.

oldest buildings of the Nonotuck Silk complex (most recently Pro Corporation) date from this period. The largest industrial concern on Nonotuck Street through the nineteenth century, the history of the company is thoroughly detailed in Marjorie Senechal’s *Northampton’s Century of Silk*.



Florence Eagle baseball team, 1865 to 1867. Nearly unbeatable in their three year history, the team of Florence boys, men really, from above and “under the hill.” Luther Askin (not pictured here) and John B. O’Donnell (seated right) lived on Nonotuck Street.

Irish Immigration and Black Resettlement

In 1848 James O’Donnell left Ireland for the United States. His family was on the brink of ruin like so many Irish families during the potato famine. They stayed behind to struggle through a year without their breadwinner. James found his way to Hadley, Massachusetts where he worked for a time on railroad construction crews. He shortly had enough money to arrange for his family to join him. When jobs began to open up at the fledgling mills in Florence he moved his family to Nonotuck Street. It appears that his brother, Terrence, had already settled there and soon his son John was working in the cotton mill of J. P. Williston.

Thanks to John B. O’Donnell’s later legal and political career he was in a good position to have the public take an interest in his recollections, which he shared with Charles A. Sheffield for his *History of Florence*. His fondness for his adopted village is

transparent and stimulated his memory of events that would otherwise have gone undocumented. We see the beginnings of the famed Eagle baseball team as he describes his early run-ins with Julius Phelps the constable who tried to keep John and other boys from playing baseball on Sundays. They played in a field opposite his house on Nonotuck near where Landy Avenue now runs.

By 1850 nearly a third of the population of Ireland had emigrated, mostly to the United States. Only three years after the worst year of the Irish Potato Famine, 43 adults and children born in Ireland were living on Nonotuck. Of the 129 residents of Nonotuck between the houses of Henry Hickey and Sarah Askin, 63% were either African American or Irish American.

O'Donnell lived down the street from the Askin family whose eldest son Luther joined O'Donnell on the Eagle baseball team that formed in 1865 to play against a highly favored team of returning Civil War veterans. Northern soldiers had played the new game to pass time between battle assignments. The Twentieth Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry had won the championship of the Army of the Potomac. The Florence boys, with Askin playing, unexpectedly defeated the veterans by the score of 30 to 3. Baseball historian Brian Turner recognized that, with Askin playing outfield, the Eagle became the first racially integrated organized baseball team in the United States four years before the 1869 team from Oberlin College in Ohio.

Arthur G. Hill, son of Samuel L. Hill, was also a player on the Eagle. The team lost only six games over their three year history while winning close to 60. Such was the Eagle's fame that it may have helped Hill become the second mayor of Northampton. O'Donnell would later be elected the fifth mayor and the first of Irish birth.

By 1860 the Askins were the only African American family remaining on Nonotuck Street. Hannah Randall, Laura Knowles Washington, and Basil Dorsey had all moved to the road to Easthampton joining Henry Anthony as the only remaining black families in Florence. Anthony's first wife Mary, who died in 1843, and second wife Marion were both Irish. The Irish population continued to grow comprising nearly half the population of Nonotuck Street and almost the entire new development of what are now Bliss Street and Scanlon Avenue.



Luther Askin

In 1979 the Annunciation Church celebrated its 100th anniversary in a publication entitled *Our First Hundred Years*. The writer attributes the acceptance of the Irish and French Canadians in Florence to the tolerant attitudes of the Free Congregational Society, the organizational descendent of the Northampton Association of Education and Industry:

The Free Congregational Society of Florence probably helped to ease the acceptance of the Papists, as Catholics were then called....It was founded for "advancement in truth and goodness, and for the promotion of general intelligence, good morals, and liberal religious sentiments." Membership was open to people of all faiths and made no distinction "on account of sex, or color, or nationality."...Because so many of the benefactors of the village (Samuel Hill and A. T. Lilly in particular) espoused the Free Congregational credo, the local Catholics were probably more readily accepted than they might have been in other areas of New England.

The son of one of these Free Thinkers cleared the way for the establishment of a Catholic parish in Florence to serve the faith of the new population. Samuel Hill's son, Arthur, sold the property to the Roman Catholic Diocese of Springfield for the erection of Annunciation Church.

225 Nonotuck in the Context of Nonotuck Street as a Whole

The house at 225 Nonotuck Street is one of four houses remaining west of Maple Street. Maps dating back to 1854 show eight building outlines along this section of Nonotuck Street. Four houses including the historic Askin homestead, the “Adam” house of the Community and two others have been removed all subsequent to the aerial photos taken by Dwight Church around 1950 (See photo at right and on next page).

While the census in combination with deed research has allowed us to determine nineteenth century occupants of some of the houses along Nonotuck the fact that the mills owned this housing until 1891 make this difficult for many more. If this building was in existence for the 1850 census, when the census taker appears to have taken a straight shot down Nonotuck Street, then my best determination is that the occupants were either the family of Stephen Dunn (436/542) or Richard Clancy (435/541) both born in Ireland. In 1855, the census taker took a more circuitous route with Stephen Dunn still a possible tenant



225 Nonotuck as it appears today.

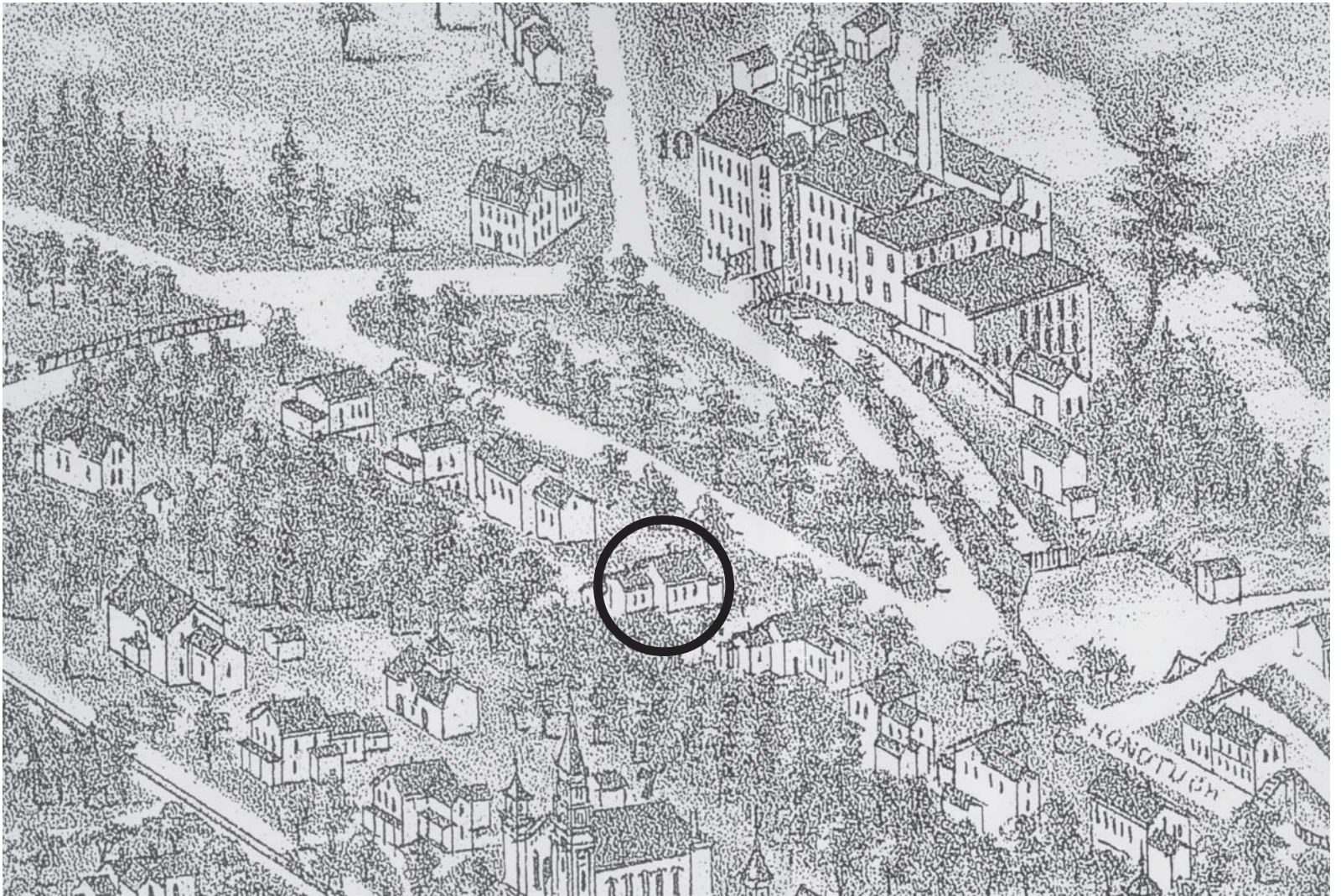


The Askin family house is the light colored two story house shown in the center of this aerial photo from the early 1950s. I believe the Adam house, shown in the photograph below from Sheffield's *History*, is the house next door obscured by trees.

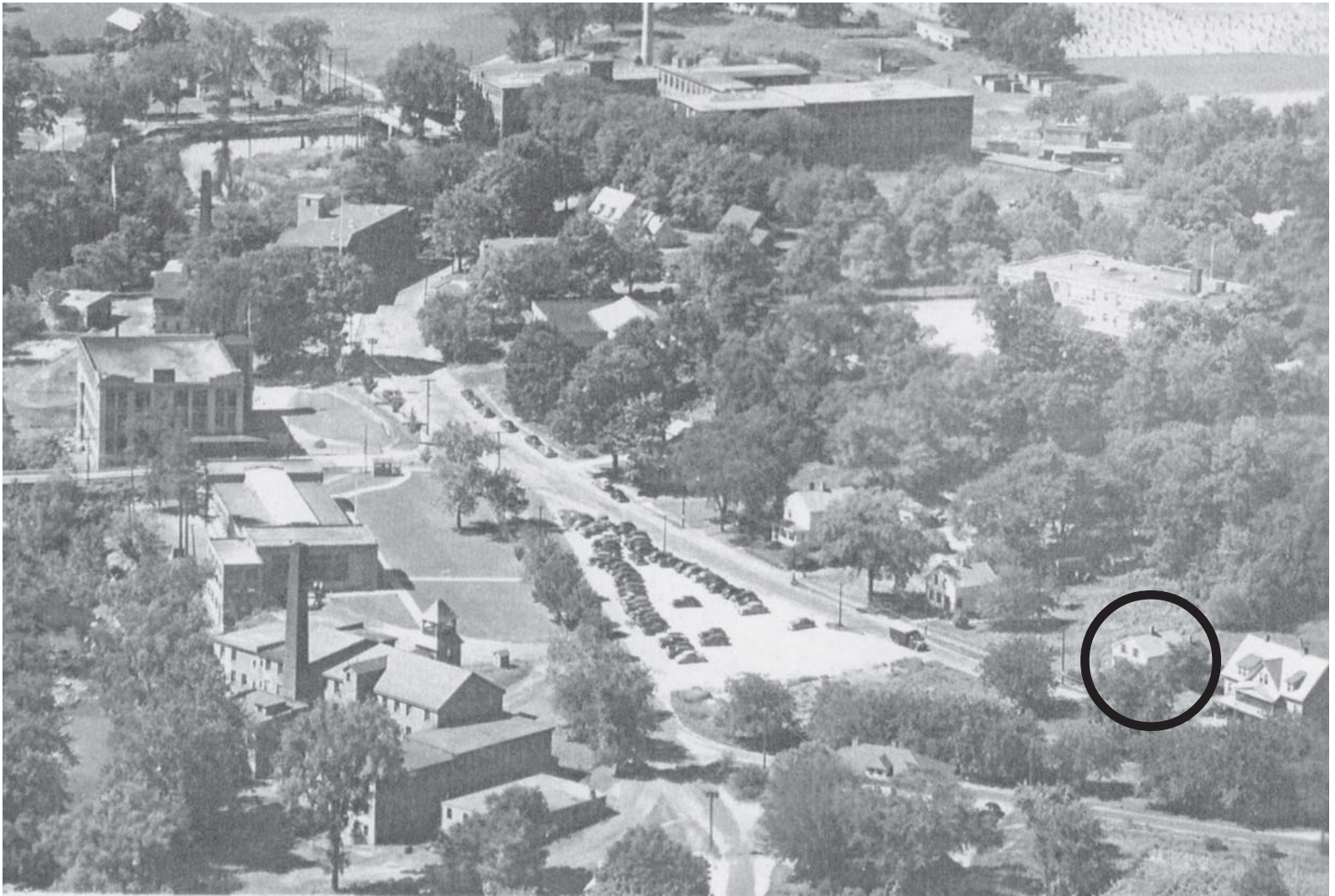
as well as William Gavin, another Irishman. Other possible tenants in 1860 include Lewis Howard from Massachusetts and Orrin More from Vermont; 1870, John Lovena from Canada and William O'Brien from Ireland. This technique of marking known real estate owners as landmarks on the map produced closest in time to the census actually gets more difficult going forward in time. The population of Florence boomed after the Civil War. It is not until November of 1891 that the first deed to a private owner—Margaret A. Green married to a B. Green, (the name is indecipherable in the 1900 census) age 40, a steel polisher from Ireland, is listed as the head of the household in the 1900 census.



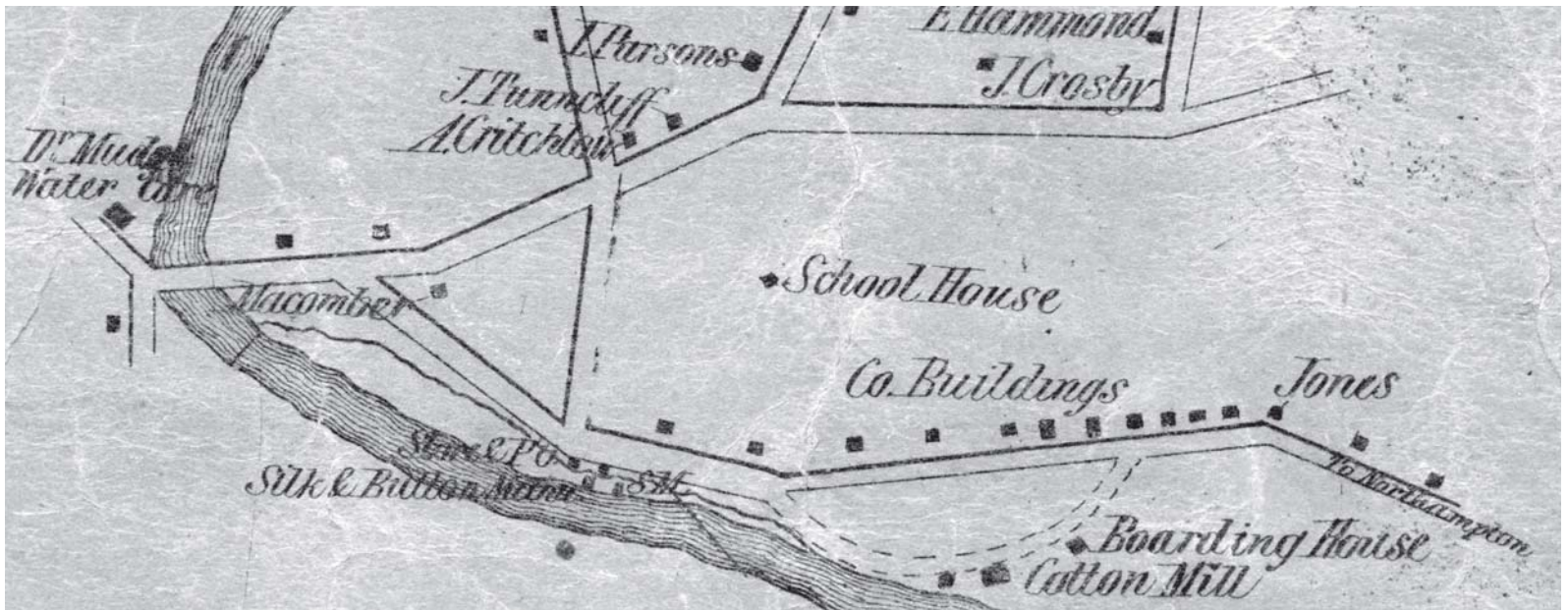
William Adam, a founder of the NAEI, lived in this house, one of six individual houses the Community owned, at the west end of Nonotuck. Known as “10” a Major Angell live here in the 1880's and 1890's.



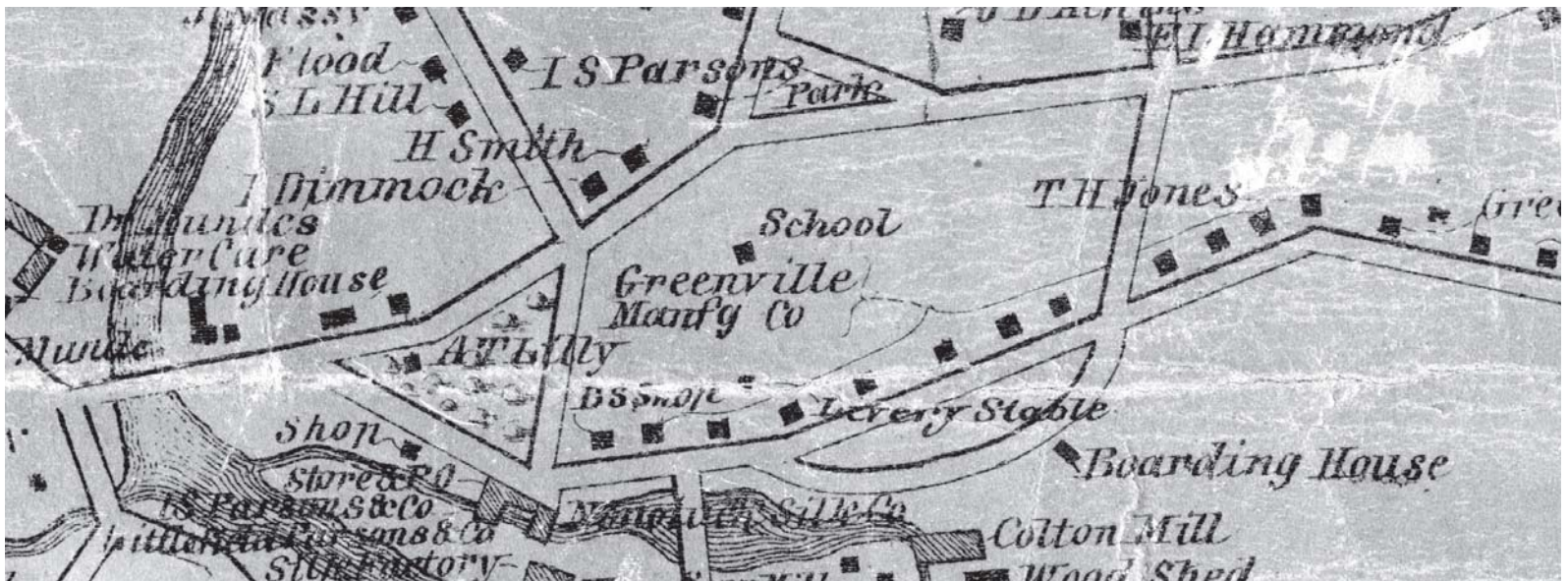
225 Nonotuck Street is circled in this 1879 bird's eye view of Florence. The three buildings to the left remain, the four to the right have been removed. The large mill building in the upper right was the silk mill of the NAEI, later converted to cotton goods manufacturing. It was demolished in 1968. The building just to its right goes back to at least 1854 and still stands at the corner of Riverside Drive and Nonotuck Street. It was a boarding house built by the Greenville Manufacturing Company. (Image courtesy of the Florence History Museum.)



Aerial view with 225 Nonotuck circled. The large building in the lower left of the photo is the original Northampton Silk Building built by Samuel Whitmarsh in 1837. It later became the silk factory and boarding house of the NAEI, and the Greenville Manufacturing Company. In the upper part of the photo in the middle is the Gothic Revival cottage of Alfred T. Lilly demolished to make the mini-mall at Corticelli and Pine Street. (Photo courtesy of the Florence History Museum.)

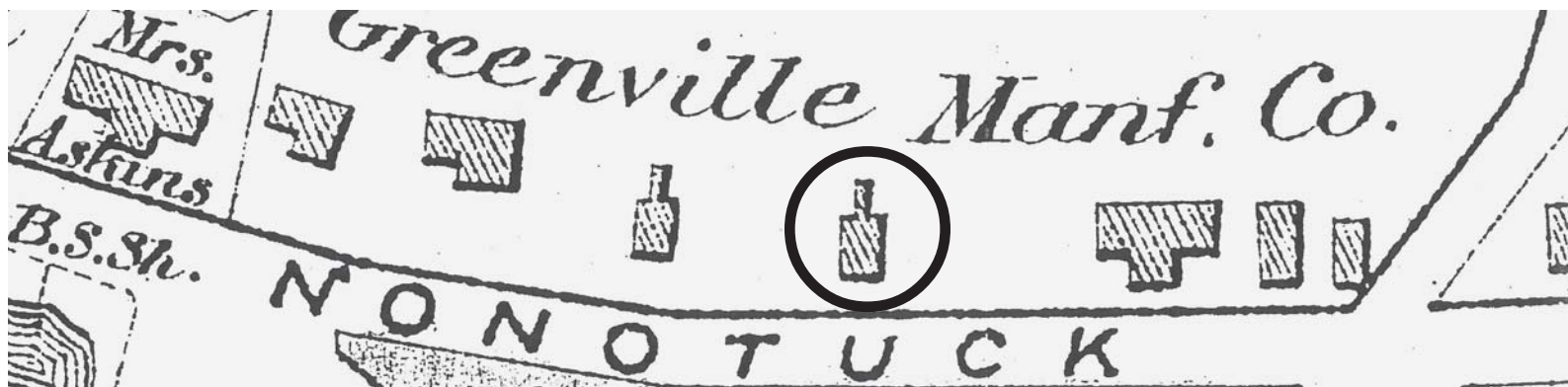


The 1854 map of Florence shows the north side of Nonotuck Street peppered with buildings. "Jones" refers to the house of T. H. Jones, a fugitive slave from North Carolina. Williston's cotton mill and Critchlow's button shop are shown by the river. Both factories hired fugitives slaves, free born blacks and Irish immigrants who lived nearby. The building labeled "Boarding House" is still standing near the intersection of Nonotuck and Riverside Drive.

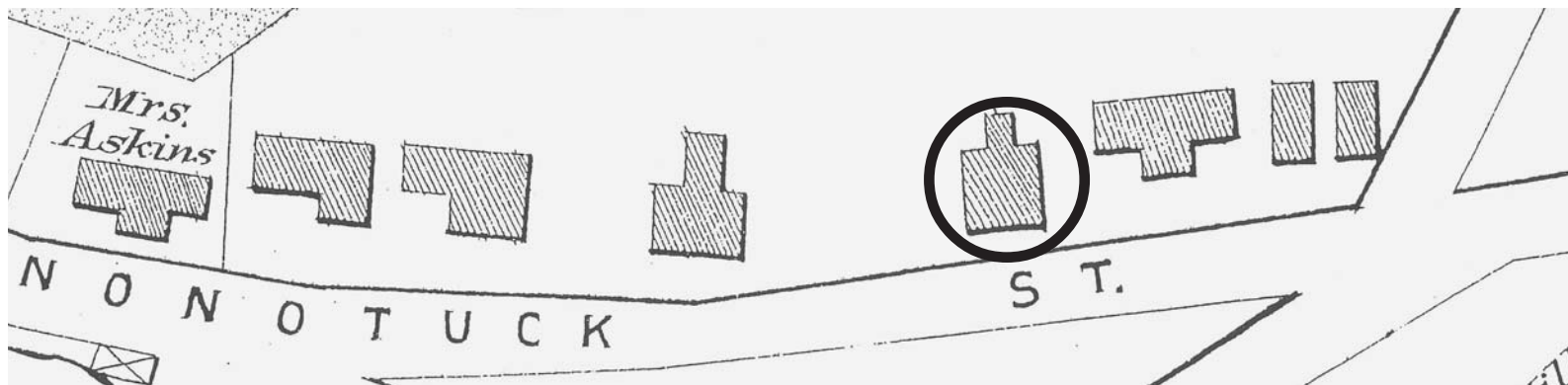


1860 map of Florence. Maple Street has been extended to connect Nonotuck with the upper plain of Florence.

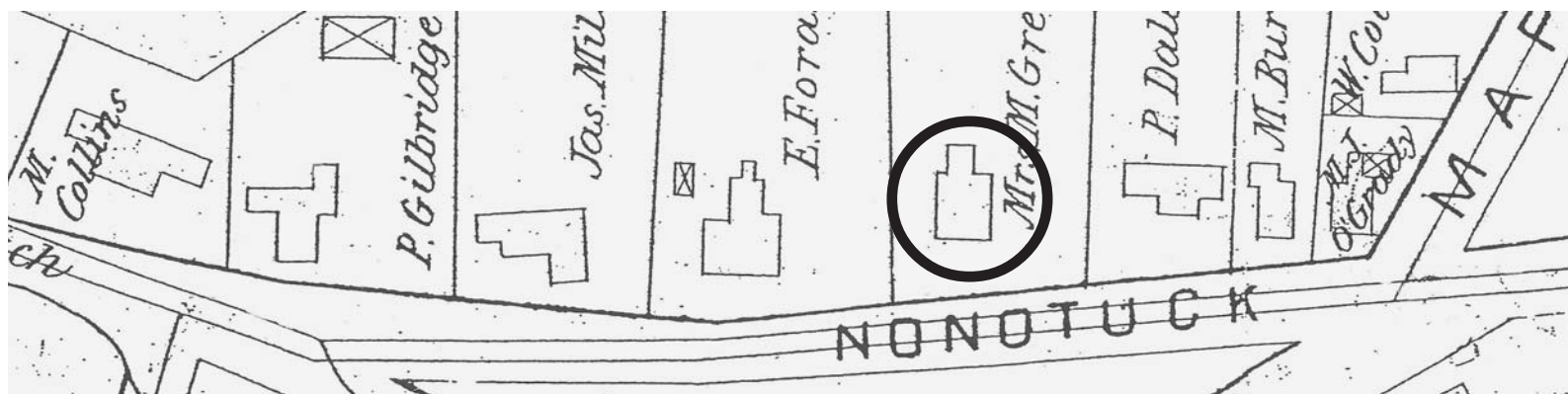
1873



1884



1895



Conclusion: The Significance of 225 Nonotuck Street and Where We Go from Here

On December 17, 2007 the Northampton Historical Commission decided to impose a demolition delay for the house at 225 Nonotuck Street. The architectural aspects of the modest structure were presumably not a major factor in the decision. Instead the Commission's position was based on arguments for the cultural significance of the building. Since the research of deeds has led to no conclusive dating of the building and the inspection by the restoration carpenter Kris Thomson was incomplete, a strong contextual case needed to be made for preserving a presumed abolition era structure situated on an historic street.

Before its January 28, 2008 meeting it is unlikely the Commission will have the opportunity to conduct a more thorough architectural analysis. It is also doubtful that there will be a breakthrough in the documentary evidence allowing us to better date the house's construction or determine for certain who were its earliest inhabitants. The house has been passed down in a maternal line of succession of Irish descended owners from its first private deed in 1891.

We do know, even with the number of buildings we have lost to date, that remnants of the NAEI and the Greenville Manufacturing Company have more architectural integrity than either of the contemporary "utopian" communities of Brook Farm and Hopedale.

We do know that in few other places in the Commonwealth can we interpret the split in the abolition movement in 1839-40 where so many significant players including William Lloyd Garrison, Lydia Maria Child, and Frederick Douglass were associated with the Florence Community.

And, we do know that this house sits in the middle of what was an early and rare multicultural community of African Americans, Irish Americans, German Americans, Canadian and Anglo Americans living and working next to each other in relative harmony. It's proximity to houses and factories, extant and extinct, that played such a vital role in the development of the unique multicultural fabric of Nonotuck Street makes it, in my view, certainly culturally significant.

We may have the opportunity to create a history education center as the outcome of our negotiations with the owner. While it will demand of us, the Commission and the Florence History Community, that we pull together our options in a coherent plan, under a tight deadline, I believe the effort and risk to be worthwhile. By creating this center we can also help the community understand how important it is to preserve the other threatened architectural and open space legacies of this pivotal era in Florence and Northampton history.