

1824: Forming of the Borough

COLCHESTER — From the beginning community life centered around the First Society meeting house. Which also became the center of commerce, surrounded on all sides by prosperous farms.

Under the leadership of Dr. John R. Watrous it was decided to form the Borough of Colchester an independent political entity within the town. Watrous was the first warden.

The borough was incorporated in 1824 because the needs of town residents and merchants

differed from those of the farmers who did not live close to each other.

Created by the General Assembly, the borough which is still in existence, is governed by a Board of Warden and Burgesses, which is empowered to make laws.

The early borough government was concerned with the regulation of "markets and nuisances within the borough."

It had the power to levy taxes (borough residents pay taxes to the town as well) and to lay out

new highways, streets and public walks.

History shows little village improvement during the borough's 25 years, although several unsuccessful attempts were made to get control and lay out Center Green as it is today.

By 1830, Colchester's fame as an educational center diminished because other academies sprung up in other sections of the state and nation.

The number of tuition pupils lessened and the academy's efficiency declined.

Colchester was in a slump. But not for long.

Company Founded

Nathaniel Hayward founded the Hayward Rubber Co. here in 1847. Untold prosperity followed.

Until then, there had been only small industries, besides the early grist and saw mills.

Hayward, a young livery stable owner in Boston, became interested in the manufacture of Indian Rubber in 1834 when he saw President Andrew Jackson wearing a suit of waterproof clothes given by a manufacturer of rubber-coated cloth.

Hayward, with his partner, Henry Burr, had opened a rubber shoe factory in Lisbon, Conn. in 1844. It was so successful that they were soon looking around for a place to expand.

Burr was married to a daughter of the prominent Isham family of Colchester. Mrs. Burr wanted to return to her native town.

Economics played no part in the selecting Colchester for the new plant site. The choice was based on a woman's whim.

At that time, Colchester had no transportation facilities whatever. It was about 20 miles from any water way. Railroads were in their infancy. The cost of trucking over these 20 miles of country roads would add substantially to the cost of the finished product.

Firm Thrived

Nevertheless, the firm thrived. From a capital investment of \$100,000, it grew, through capitalization of profits, to \$500,000 and an annual output of \$2 million. The payroll was some \$300,000 or more yearly.

Early in the company's history, it became necessary to import workers and a tremendous influx of Irish immigrants resulted. A Roman Catholic church became a necessity.

Although the population of the town increased by about 1,000, Colchester remained an independent community and lived mostly on the products of its soil.

All kinds of religious, social, cultural, musical, educational, athletic and recreational activities flourished.

Hayward was never the traditional paternalistic mill owner, but he played, on a minor scale, the role of the 19th-century philanthropist.

From 1852 to 1879, the office of borough warden was held by key men in the rubber mill, beginning with Hayward himself. There is no evidence of undue influence on local politics, however.

The Civil War found the company in a splendid position to reap the benefits of government contracts. Gov. William A. Buckingham, also served as the firm's secretary-treasurer, a situation which apparently was not considered a conflict of interest at the time.

Colchester sent 205 soldiers to the front besides contributing a considerable number to the quota of adjoining towns.

Moving Force

The rubber company undoubtedly was the moving force behind the incorporation of the Colchester Railway Co. in 1876. William H. Hayward, Nathaniel's son, was its first president.

To take care of the large volume of business being transacted in town, the Colchester Savings Bank was formed in 1874. It prospered during the life of the rubber plant, its deposits reaching a total of \$300,000.

The high price of rubber and unfair trading practices began to plague the local firm which had to shut down for periods of time during the 1880s.

The rubber plant closed its doors as usual in 1893, ostensibly for the Christmas holidays, never to open again. The U.S. Rubber Co. bought the mill outright and transferred elsewhere.

A local newspaper wrote, "The borough of Colchester is dead, killed by the rubber trust, and the town from which it takes its name is dying by inches from the gangrene of the fatal wound inflicted upon it by the same ruthless monster..."

Modern historian Barbara Brown writes, "Thus the public, with its innate dislike and distrust of big business, blamed the totally innocent 'rubber trust,' little realizing that the end would have come anyway. In its weakened financial condition, the company would never have survived the panic of 1893, one of the worst business crises of American economic history."

"Colchester having risen to dizzy heights, was due for a fall, and the fall was a hard one. Then and ever since, it has had to pay the price for a moment of glory which was based on poor economic planning."

Exodus

"The Hayward Rubber Co. lasted as long as it did because it got in on the ground floor of a booming pioneer industry, but in the competitive world of the 20th-century business, it was doomed to failure," she concludes.

An exodus of the rubber workers came after the closing of the mill. The 1900 U.S. census shows a population drop of about 1,000.

A leather shoe factory, established to take the place of the rubber mill, soon failed. Then the canning factory, the creamery and the bank wound up their affairs and became ancient history.

The 200th anniversary of the founding of the town saw Colchester at its lowest ebb.

In 1908, the entire plant of the Hayward Rubber Co. on Mill Street, was burned to the ground by a fire of mysterious origin.

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