CHAPTER IV

FALL RIVER A TOWN

Struggle Over the Separation From Freetown. Change of the Name. Building the First Mills. The Whaling Industry

By 1800 the population of Freetown had reached 2,535, and the agitation for setting off the southern portion as a separate community, which had been on foot for some time, began to gain new strength. It was opposed by the residents of the northern section, however, for various reasons, and was a subject of discussion at several town meetings.

The Thomas Durfee House, 94 Cherry Street

The grounds on which the desire for a division was based appear in the petiiton of Thomas Borden and 155 others, dated January 12, 1802. It was addressed to the General Court and ran in part as follows:

"The Subscribers Inhabitants of the South End of Freetown Humbly Shew that their Situation in Sd town is extremely Unfortunate Owing to The great Distance the Town meetings are Held from them Which Cannot be Remidied in the Towns Present Situation It Being in a Triangular form as by the Plan exhibited will appear & the principal Settlements Being at the three extreme Points & a Central Place Not Possible to be Obtained There Being a Long Sunken Swamp Impassable at Almost All times in the year Runing From the South almost to the North Part of the town about the middle of the Town from East to West Which Obliges us to Hold our Meeting at the North End of the Town, a Distance of Eight Miles, & almost All the Inhabitants of the Southern Village Being Seafaring & Trades Men & it Being Intirely Impossible to be Provided with Horses Sufficient for So Great a Proportion of the Inhabitants as are and Ever Will be Destitute. . . ."

A town meeting to consider the matter was held February 4, 1802, with Nathaniel Morton moderator. By a unanimous vote it was decided that the town should not be divided agreeable to this petition and further "that the town of Freetown shall not be divided at any rate." Apparently a change of opinion took place at once, for at the same meeting these votes were reconsidered and a committee appointed "to divide the town and where to divide the sd town if divided at all." Adjournment for one hour was taken, and on coming together again the committee reported a line to start from the Taunton river about where the

The Brownell House, 285 North Main Street

present line is, and various recommendations as to sharing debts if the division were effected. The report was accepted and Nathaniel Morton, Jr., was appointed the agent of the town to oppose the Borden petition in the Legislature.

Mr. Morton represented to the General Court that a division was "totally repugnant to the opinion and wishes of the town

Old Free Love House, No. 1001 North Main Street

and as much against its interest and convenience." The valuation of Freetown, he said, was only about that of the average Massachusetts town, and a division would cause it to sink into corporate insignificance. Moreover, it was "incapable of division in any manner or form so as to give to the parts when separate an equal participation of advantages and disadvantages." The southern section was represented to have the advantage of situation and property in proportion to numbers. It had also the best soil by far, two-fifths of the population, one-half the property and "next to no proportion of the poor and a prospect of perpetually having the advantage in this respect, the petitioners having so run the line of partition as to exclude from their plan not only actual paupers and expence for the poor with which we do and must at an unusual rate abound," as well as included the whole of the valuable shell fishery. The argument that the petitioners were seafaring men and hence without horses and unable to attend town meetings, was met by the statement that they had a higher proportion of horses according to their numbers than the rest of the town and had in addition the means of easy water communication with the present center, an advantage of which the rest of the town was destitute.

A second remonstrance was presented by Peter Crapo and others living near the Dartmouth line, that the proposed boundaries would leave them in an out-of-the-way section, far from the center, and render the maintenance of a school difficult. A third remonstrance from the old town asked that the line be placed farther south, as by the contemplated line certain sections would "be left in such an anomalous, uncouth and eccentric form that it will not be long before another division will undoubtedly take place."

The joint committee of the Legislature reported leave to withdraw, on the petition for division, and the report was accepted by the Senate, but the House non-concurred and appointed a special committee to proceed to Freetown, view the territory and consider the matter. The Senate concurred in this, and on February 5, 1803, reported in favor of a division on the lines subsequently established. The report was accepted and the petitioners given leave to bring in a bill in accordance with the report. This went through the several stages and the new

Old Matthew Boomer House, No. 889 North Main Street

town was incorporated as Fall River (spelled as one word) February 26, 1803.

The incorporation did not put an end to local differences, for at a town meeting at Fall River, May 19, 1804, little more than a year later, it was voted to change the name of the town to Troy. This was followed by a petition to the General Court dated May 22, 1804, and signed by 74 inhabitants, praying that the name of the town be changed, and citing the following reasons in support of their request:

"That whereas in the late division & incorporation of this township, the inhabitants thereof were not consulted with regard to

the circumstance of its name, by those who were entrusted with the management of the business, who all happened to live at or near the river called Fall-River, & who therefore procured without opposition the name which it now bears, and altho' the consideration of its name may appear to those who live remote from us merely circumstantial and of comparatively little consequence, yet we humbly conceive that as the noted vicinity which has been long known by that appelation is situate in a very extream part

The Old Gun House on Rock Street near Bedford Street

of the town, the present name of Fall River will serve no other purpose but to beget and keep alive many local prejudices which will seriously disturb the minds & peace of the inhabitants in general."

The name Troy is said to have been selected because of the favorable impression made on a prominent citizen by the town of Troy, N. Y., on a recent visit. There was apparently no opposition, for the bill was passed without amendment and became an act June 18, 1804.

The new title of the town was retained nearly thirty years, till 1833, when a petition to the General Court was presented, signed by Ebenezer Andrews and 134 others, asking that the name be changed back to Fall River. They represented that on account of the fact that there were eight or nine towns and villages bearing the name of Troy their letters and packages were mis-sent, delayed and sometimes never received; that "Fall River, the name of the village in said Town of Troy where most of the business is transacted & where most of the inhabitants reside, is better known & understood abroad than the name of Troy" and that it would be a great accommodation to have the change made.

The matter was supported by the selectmen's petition in accordance with a vote passed in town meeting March 18, 1833. The Legislature referred it to the next General Court. It was taken up at that session and became an act February 12, 1834.

If the statement of the Freetown representative when he protested against the division of the town, that the petitioners had two-fifths of the population, is accepted, the number of inhabitants in Fall River at its incorporation was about 1,000. This is probably not far from the truth, for the census of 1810 gave a population of but 1,296. The village of Fall River, near the center of the present city, numbered, in 1803, but about 100, according to a historian of 60 years ago, who included in this estimate a number of residents living in Tiverton, on the south side of the Quequechan. Nine of the eighteen families in the hamlet were Bordens. The others were the Braytons, Cooks, Davols, Luthers, Buffintons and Bowens, all names still prominent in the city.

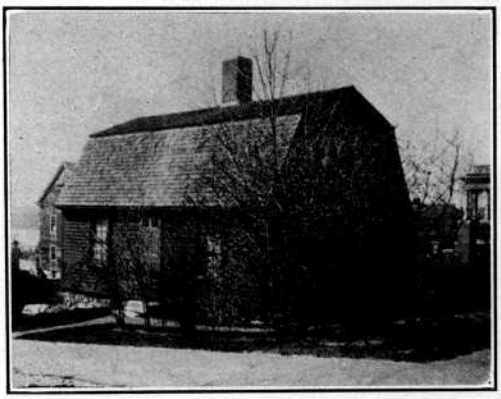
A small cotton mill, the first in this vicinity, had been erected in 1811 at Globe Village, then a part of Tiverton, and two years later two mills were erected on the Quequechan, the Troy Cotton & Woolen Manufactory and the Fall River Manufactory, in which power weaving was introduced in 1817. The postoffice had been established at the village of Fall River in 1811, removed to Steep Brook for a brief interval and then brought back. The census of 1820 showed that the population had increased since 1810 to 1,594.

The next decade saw a very decided step forward. The Pocasset Mills and the Iron Works were established in 1821, Robeson's print works, the Massasoit Mill and a satinet factory all about 1824, the Anawan Mill and the Fall River Bank in 1825, the line of steamboats to Providence in 1827, and the Fall River Savings Bank in 1828. The "Monitor" newspaper had begun publication in 1826, and in 1830 the predecessor of the National Union Bank had established itself just over the line in Tiverton. The census of 1830 showed that the population as the result of the town's prosperity had much more than doubled, rising from 1,594 to 4,159. Stage lines to Providence, Newport and New Bedford had been established in 1825.

In the following ten years the American Print Works were established, existing plants enlarged and the population increased

more gradually to 6,738 in 1840. Then came the disastrous fire of 1843, the building of the railroad, the establishment of a line of boats to New York, the erection of the Wyoming Mills in 1845, the Metacomet in 1847 and the American Linen in 1852. Various newspapers sprang up, but the only one that was to last was the "Weekly News," the publication of which had begun April 3, 1845. The banking facilities were increased by the Massasoit Bank in 1846, the Citizens' Savings in 1851, the Metacomet in 1852 and the Pocasset in 1854. The population advanced slowly to 11,170 in 1850, and about 12,000 in 1854, when the town was incorporated as a city.

As late as 1822 the town's paupers were sold by auction to persons who would offer to keep them for the least compensation, but this practice was discontinued a few years later, and in 1835 the Brownell farm



Old Church House, corner June and French Streets

was purchased as a poor farm. The north burial ground was bought in 1825, and a town house erected on a part of the land the same year, to take the place of a building constructed at Steep Brook in 1805. The new house was removed to its present location on the corner of Central and Durfee streets in 1836. Cells were placed under it the next year and the building used till the present city hall was ready for occupancy.

A beginning in a fire department was made in 1826 by the appointment of ten fire wards. An engine was purchased and a house erected in 1829, and a second engine in 1845. A night watch of police was begun in 1844, and a hospital established in 1851. Pocasset, Pleasant and Anawan (formerly Broad) streets were opened in 1831, and Cherry, Spring, Washington and Union the following year. Gas was introduced in 1847.

Private conveyance was the only means of communication with neighboring places till the establishment in 1825 of stage lines to Providence, New Bedford and Newport, which arrived here at noon and left at 1 o'clock. The steamer Hancock began regular trips to Providence in September, 1828, and was followed by the King Philip in 1832, the Bradford Durfee in 1845 and the Canonicus in 1849. Other small boats made occasional trips. Communication with New York was by sailing packets till 1847, when the Bay State Steamboat Company was formed, with a capital of $300,000, and the Bay State commenced regular trips, with the Massachusetts as an alternate boat. The Empire State was put on the line the following year and the Metropolis in 1854.

Both the New York and Providence lines had been established largely through the efforts of Col. Richard and Jefferson Borden, of the Iron Works Company, and they with N. B. Borden were also instrumental in building a railroad to Myricks in 1846 to connect with the New Bedford and Taunton road and over the tracks of the Providence road to Boston. The first terminus here was just south of the Central street tunnel, and after about a year was removed to the wharf on the starting of the New York line.

The early mills were but small affairs, the Fall River Manufactory of 1,500 spindles and the Troy 2,000. At first little was done in the factories but the spinning of the yarn. The cotton was picked by hand in the homes at four cents a pound, spun in the mills and then woven by the housewives in their dwellings till the introduction of power looms about 1817. The cloth was coarser than the regular 64 square prints of to-day, being but 44x44, and made of yarn running from No. 20 to 25. Wages were low, in accordance with the cost of living, and the hours long. A mill superintendent in 1830 had $2 a day, ordinary hands 83 cents to $1 and overseers $1.25. Work began at 5, or as soon as light, with 30 minutes for breakfast at 8 o'clock, and the same for dinner at noon. The day ended about 7:30 p. m. New England rum was served to the men at 11 each morning till 1827. Only Americans were employed at first, then English and Scotch, who came on the establishing of the print works, and Irish after 1843.

Calico printing was begun here in Robeson's print works, in 1826, in buildings on

Pocasset street now owned by William J. Dunn. The plant was a large one for its day and gave employment to many hands. A printing machine, possibly the first in the country, was set up here in 1827, but block printing was continued until 1847, when, following a strike, it gave way to machine work. The owner, Andrew Robeson, of New Bedford, with whom his sons, William R. and Andrew, Jr., were associated after a time, was forced to make an assignment by the depression of 1848, and the business was carried on by a corporation known as the Fall River Print Works, until about 1860, when the printing machines were taken out and cotton machinery substituted. Mr. Robeson resided in New Bedford and drove to this city each day. He is remembered with especial gratitude by some aged men still living, who were formerly in his employ, and who benefitted by a school he established for them in connection with the works.

Among other men prominent in the leadership of affairs here was David Anthony, the first agent of the Fall River Manufactory and for forty years president of the Fall River Bank; Oliver Chace, the originator and first agent of the Troy Mill; Bradford Durfee, of the Pocasset Mill; Richard and Jefferson Borden, of the Iron Works, print works, railroad and steamboat lines; Stephen and William C. Davol, Dr. Nathan Durfee, Micah Ruggles, Dr. Foster Hooper; James Ford, Eliab Williams, Louis Lapham and Hezekiah Battelle, lawyers; Phineas W. Leland, collector of customs and State Senator; Orin Fowler, pastor of the First Congregational Church, and member of Congress; Nathaniel B. Borden, also a member of Congress and active in many enterprises; Simeon Borden, engineer, Harvey Chace, manufacturer, and Edmund Chace, tanner.

The Exchange Hotel on Rock street, now known as the Gunn estate, was long the principal hostelry here after 1830. It had been erected in 1827 as the private residence of John C. Borden, and was surrounded by his grounds, running from Bedford to Franklin street and west nearly to North Main. It was a remarkable structure in its day, with fifty-five rooms, hand-carved mantles and window casings with floors, ceilings and doors of hard pine and walls decorated by landscape artists. At the death of Mr. Borden in 1833 it was converted into a hotel, conducted by James Valentine, then by John D. Thornton and later by a stock company composed of Joshua Remington, Iram Smith, Samuel Hamlet and Horatio N. Gunn, who carried it on for a decade or more. Mr. Gunn's partners died, and he having secured control, closed it to the public, and used it as his private residence. It is still owned and occupied by his daughters. The stone stable opposite, used by Kirby for many years, and torn down in 1904, was originally the private stable of Mr. Borden, and later as the hotel stable was the headquarters of the various stages.

Main Street in 1838

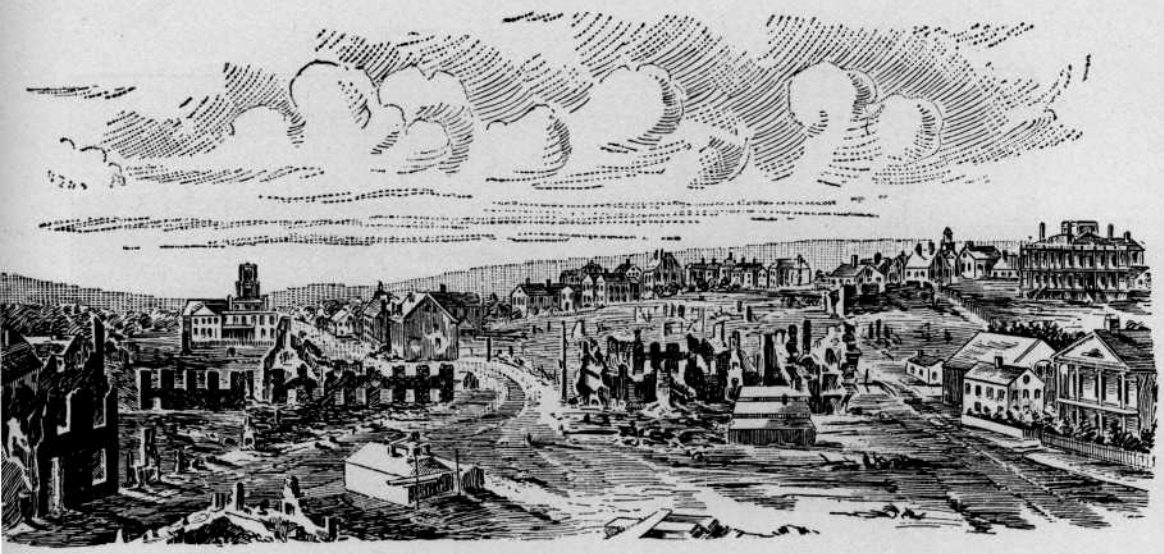
The Avery case, as it is still called by the older inhabitants, occurred in 1832 and made a great sensation at the time. Rev. Ephraim

K. Avery, a Methodist minister of Bristol, was charged with the murder of Sarah Maria Cornell, a factory girl, who had been found strangled to death by a cord on a part of the John Durfee farm, now the northeast corner of the South park, December 31, 1832. Avery was tried at Newport the following year, when a total of 239 witnesses were called and the jury, after being out seventeen hours, returned a verdict of not guilty.

The great fire of 1843 occurred on Sunday, July 2, and was an almost appalling calamity for the little town, from which it recovered with rapidity, however. It started about 4 o'clock in the afternoon among shavings in the rear of a large three-story warehouse at the corner of South Main and Borden streets, ignited by the firing of a small cannon by boys. A high southwest wind was blowing and so fanned the flames and carried the sparks that the buildings on both sides of Main street, the business center, were soon burning. The whole space between Main, Franklin, Rock and Borden streets was burned over, about twenty acres, and nearly all the village would probably have been destroyed had not the wind changed to the north, driving the flames back over the burned district. No rain had fallen for weeks, so that the buildings were very dry, the water in the stream had been shut off to allow repairs, and there was no fire-fighting apparatus except hand engines and bucket brigades. The total number of buildings destroyed, which included the Old Bridge mill and the Methodist and Christian churches, was 196, and the number of persons residing within the burned district 1,334. The loss was $526,485, on which there was $175,475 insurance.

A local relief committee was at once appointed and an appeal for help sent to other communities, which resulted in the receipt of $50,934. Of this amount $13,165 came from Boston, $1,700 from Providence and the same from New Bedford.

In this fire was destroyed the famous skeleton in armour, commemorated by Longfellow in his poem of that title. The skeleton had been found in 1832 in a sand or gravel bank near Hartwell and Fifth streets, near the surface, and buried in a sitting posture. It was quite perfect and had a triangular plate of brass covering the sternum, while around the waist was a belt of brass tubes four or five inches in length, about the size of a pipe-stem, placed parallel and close together. Arrowheads were also found in the grave. Various theories as to the identity of the skeleton were advanced, but the configuration of the skull, the position in which it was found and the fact that parts of other skeletons were found near by, make it probable that these were the bones of an Indian, possibly Massasoit himself.



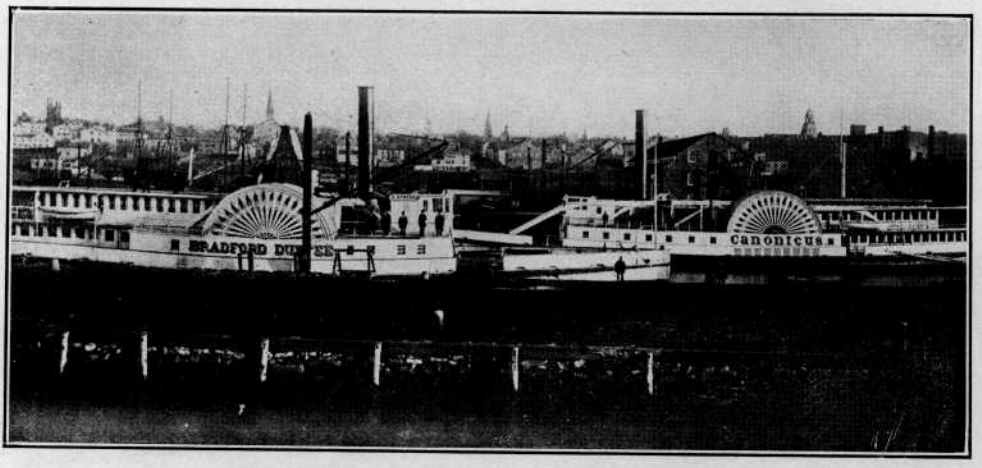
Fire of July, 1843

The Clough murder case of 1852 was attended by sensational features that have kept

it fresh in the memories of the older citizens. A number of houses on Rock street including those of Israel Buffinton, Artemas Willard, Samuel Brown, Elijah Almy and Rev. A. P. Mason were entered early on the morning of July 16, 1852, by a burglar, who also attempted to break into other homes. He was seen and followed by two young men, and some time later pointed out to Gideon Manchester, a former constable, who entered into conversation with him and accompanied him down Pine street toward the shore. Near the corner of Elm and Central the burglar, who afterward proved to be James Clough, started to run northward on Elm street. Manchester pursued and Clough, seeing that the other was gaining on him, turned and fired, inflicting wounds which caused Manchester's death three days later. Clough then took refuge under a barn at the corner of Pine and Durfee streets, from which he was captured, identified and placed in a cell. While there he nearly escaped, and when discovered had opened his cell door and put on clothes belonging to one of his guards. He was afterwards tried, convicted and executed at Taunton. Manchester's funeral was held in the Town Hall, with services conducted by the Baptist, Congregationalist, Methodist and Presbyterian ministers, and was attended by "a vast crowd." Manchester left a widow and five small children, for whom a fund of $1,000 was raised by popular subscription.

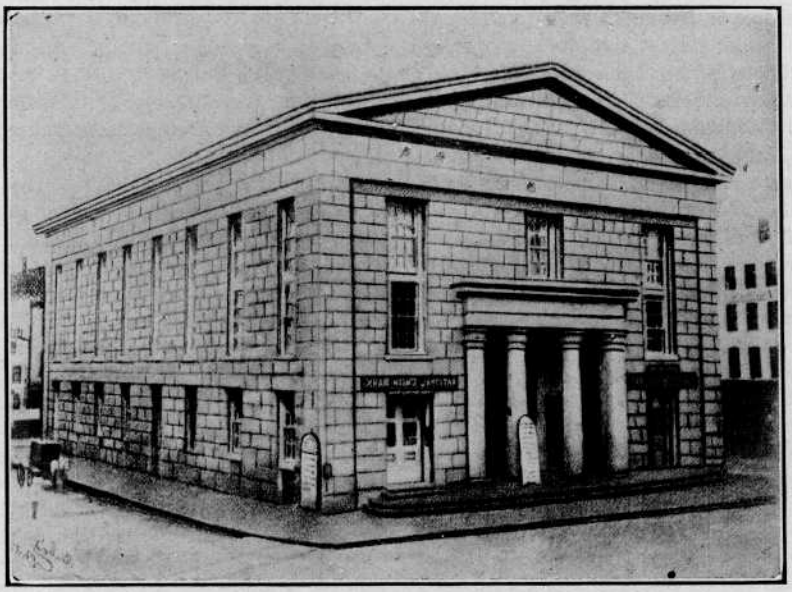
In the period between 1840 and 1850 a considerable amount of whaling was done by vessels from this port, and at times a half dozen or more were sent out. The wharf was the "oil wharf," so-called, on Davol street, north of J. A. Bowen's, where the vessels fitted for their cruises and unloaded their cargoes. The business was profitable, but was generally abandoned here on the discovery of gold in California, when the vessels were used to carry passengers to the Pacific Coast.

One of the most interesting stories in connection with the industry here, probably the most interesting, in fact—is that of the wreck of the ship Holder Borden, owned here, which sailed from this port in November, 1842, for the Pacific Ocean for oil, with Jabez Pell, master. All went well until April 12, 1844, when the vessel was wrecked on an uncharted island, afterward called Pell's Island, in the Pacific, and went to the bottom with 1,600 barrels of oil. The crew got ashore on the island—a small, uninhabited, sandy place, and with difficulty succeeded in saving a large quantity of the provisions and oil. With the lumber of the vessel which they were able to save and with the aid of some tools which they had recovered, as well as others which they had manufactured, including a saw made from a barrel hoop, they constructed a new schooner, which they called the Hope, and launched with great difficulty, on account of the sandy shore, on September 14. She was 45 feet in length on deck, 13 feet beam and had a draught of three feet. Though heavily ballasted she fell over twice, but was finally rigged. Captain



The Old Excursion Steamboats Bradford Durfee and Canonicus

Pell then took 25 of the crew, leaving the others on the shore with the oil, and sailed for Honolulu, where he sold the Hope for $1,400, bought a new vessel named the Delaware in the name of Captain Nathan Durfee, of this city, returned to the island and took on board the remainder of his crew, and what was left of the oil, which had leaked badly through the neglect of the men who had been left with it. He then sailed for home, arriving here July 8, 1845. The ownership of the oil brought home was later determined by the courts, following claims for salvage.



Old City Hall