

Henry H. Earl Captured Flavor of Early City

There are any number of reminiscences of Fall River, rich in flavor and savory in the reading, particularly those of Henry H. Earl, a historian of sorts who writes about the city before the Great Fire of July, 2, 1843.

Earl was a child when that conflagration swept locust-like through the downtown, devouring building after building, nearly impoverishing the business community and destroying almost 100 dwellings, and nearly as many stores.

He talked about Main Street life before that fire in an address in January of 1927 to members of the Fall River Historical Society, with recollections born of eager inquisitiveness and pieced together like a jigsaw puzzle.

He begins with a search to locate the Flat Rock in the downtown where fish were sold in the days before the fire and, with the help of one Clark Shove, finds that point in Main Street in the south lines of Central and Bedford Streets, "about 20 feet from the curb and within the west rails of the electric car lines." This is the starting point of the Fall River sketch of a section of the city known then as "Four Corners."

A second reference point is Cleft Rock, which, from Pilgrim times, marked the boundary between the Freeman's Purchase and that of the Pocasset Purchase. It was a point off Bedford Street at what was, in 1926, the Atwater Coal Office.

The old Pocasset Mill was in Main Street and in front of the Granite Block. The street was widened to 80 feet in front of the city hall after the fire, and it was at this point that Col. Joseph Durfee rallied his force of 15 men behind stone walls and held off British invaders (some 150 strong) from Newport in 1778.

Steps midway in the Granite Block led from

early years and was dubbed with the nickname 'Jack Mason'."

Opposite the north end of the Pocasset Mill Yard on Central Street was the residence and hotel of Maj. Durfee. At the south end of the yard was the satinet factory of Samuel Shove & Co., later J & J Eddy.

"The mill was a wooden structure and the looms were placed fronting the east of the upper floor. Naturally when all were in operation, they developed a swaying motion to the building and one day, the operatives fled to the street, lest the mill should topple over on them."

At the mill's northwest corner was a large water-wheel, with overhanging buckets. There, Durfee's three daughters performed the family washing, rinsing the clothes in the mill wheel pit across the yard.

It was to this mill wheel that Paul Peckham, with his wheelbarrow, used to gather the laundry of the women in the eastern section and submit it to rinsing. "He kept his account of business on his old soft felt hat. Only he could interpret the figures, but, he made a success of the business."

Running south from Bedford Street to the borders of the Quequechan River was an alleyway. When the foundations of the Citizens Savings Bank were put in, a large bed of shells was uncovered. As it happens, a large clam house had once been at the end of the alley and hence the remains.

In the 1850s and 1860s, leading citizens, "whose size and stature excited the wonders of the beholder," could often be seen by passersby.

Such were Edward P. Buffinton, Mayor Samuel W. Hathaway, Foster H. Stafford and Jonathan I. Hillard, superintendents of manufactories.

"Nature's noble men, six feet or more in height, weighing 280 to 300 pounds

supporting the portico and facing the White House lawn, which are also of Fall River granite, positioned there by Valentine Mason of this city, constructing supervisor.

The blocks were cut from Davol Ledge and conveyed up the Potomac River, perhaps at the urging of Congressman James Buffington.

When west Bank Street was opened up, a well was uncovered in the center of the street.

There was also a well in the garden in the rear of French's Block, both much resorted to by the neighbors of the vicinity. There was also a well of most excellent water in front of the eastern buttress of the Post Office Building.

In 1840, Main Street was lined with two rows of Elm trees, all but one of which was destroyed in the Great Fire. The survivor stood at the corner of North Main and Cherry Streets, partially blocking the sidewalk, until 1926 when it was cut down, a process which took all of a week and revealed a tap root 10 feet in diameter.

There were other houses and places in Fall River, houses like that of Charles Durfee, Esq., where Gen. Lafayette spent a night on his visit here in 1824. It once stood on Locust Street and was later moved to its present location at 94 Quarry St.

In the first half of the last century, cherry parties to Fall River from the neighboring towns and villages were quite the thing. The temperature and atmosphere were as favorable for the ripened fruit as for the cotton business. The activity centered around the fruit trees which grew in abundance on Pine, Cherry and Locust Streets.

There were, too, the high stone walls on the east side of June Street, suggestive of some penal institution but which were really built to protect the gardens and hot houses of the owners from the pre-

Steps midway in the Granite Block led from the higher Main Street to the lower level of Central Street. Edward Bennett's carding mill was on the lower level.

In that mill, Benjamin Earl, then 16, began what was to be a long business career. He also learned the printer's trade, becoming owner and proprietor of the Fall River Monitor. Matthew C. Durfee, Miss Eudora Durfee's grandfather, was editor for two years, followed by James Ford, Esq.

"Ford," writes Earl, "espoused the cause of Masonry in its turbulent

six feet or more in height, weighing 280 to 290 pounds each broadshouldered and almost perfect in proportions. They excited our admiration and respect."

That Fall River is underlaid by a solid bed of granite is well known and was known even then. The two round pillars which stood at the entrance to City Hall were hewn from Fall River granite at Davol Ledge on upper Bedford Street.

A visitor to the Treasury Department Building in Washington will find at the southwest corner a half-dozen or so immense granite pillars

gardens and hot houses of the owners from the prevailing southwest winds sweeping up the bay and destructive to delicate flowers and shrubs. In those hot houses were raised the luscious bunches of Hamburg grapes, sometimes two or three feet long with fruit as large as purple plums. They were the pride of the Fall agricultural exhibition.

There were, and still are, many facets to the city of Fall River, mellowed in the recounting, preserved like old wine in the pages of such historic bot-tlers as Henry H. Earl.



Granite Block

Street worker, at lower left, cleans out trolley tracks at top of Pocasset Street in this view circa 1890 looking north on Main Street. At left is the original Granite Block, which was more than 100 years old when fire swept it in 1928.