

## Chapter XVI

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MILL FIRES

LABOR UNIONS

STRIKES

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While every industry must meet obstacles to its success, the cotton manufacturing industry has had to meet many unusual and some severe conditions which are peculiar to itself and form a part of its history. It has valiantly met and overcome many disastrous fires, several strikes, at least two severe financial depressions and much restrictive legislation, but in Fall River the industry has failed to survive recent federal taxation and many sectional problems. These have been its undoing.

Cotton is very susceptible to fire. Its volatile character causes a fire to spread quickly and in addition to that, the oil from machinery drips upon the floors and after a series of years the floors themselves become very combustible. At the beginning there was little protection against fires, except the use of unusual care; and until the catastrophe known as the "Granite Mill Fire", mill buildings had often only a single exit, had no sprinkler systems and no fire doors. The roofs of some of the buildings were the barn roof type, having windows only at the ends. Fire escapes were not in usual use.

### *Granite Mill Fire*

The holocaust known as the Granite Mill fire occurred in the early morning of Saturday, September 19, 1874. It is the most appalling disaster in the history of our cotton manufacture. The barn shaped roof was the sixth story of the mill; the only exit was a staircase in the tower of the mill. When the fire occurred it quickly cut off access to the tower and operatives in the sixth floor were obliged to jump from the windows to save their lives. In attempting this method of escape thirty operatives were killed and many more suffered serious and life long injuries. The fire is supposed to have been caused by a friction spark which kindled some cotton; the fire department ladders were not long enough to reach the sixth floor and fire nets were not available. Such improvised nets (such as blankets and sheets which

were spread out by the firemen below) were no obstacle to the force of gravitation after a fall of approximately sixty or seventy feet. The mill itself was gutted and had to be rebuilt.

As a result of this fire, all mill buildings were required to have more than one exit; outside fire escapes of metallic construction were required to supplement the interior staircases; wooden ladders were discontinued and almost immediately the system of automatic sprinklers was invented and applied. The safety measures introduced after the "Granite" fire have prevented other serious holocausts. Emergency and safety devices against fire and government inspection have been made compulsory by legislative acts.

The industry, however, has suffered alarmingly and frequently by the fire menace, and at various times the following serious fires have occurred:

OCTOBER 26, 1821. The original building of the Troy Cotton and Woolen Manufactory, operating 1800 spindles, was burned to the ground. The blaze was occasioned by friction in the picker rooms. The troubles of the company did not come singly, as during the fire the store of the corporation was broken into and robbed of a large pocket-book containing two drafts, to the amount of \$1,662 (a goodly sum for the times), and other valuable papers. Payment on the drafts was at once ordered stopped, and Oliver Chace, the agent, inserted an advertisement in the press of several cities offering a generous reward for the recovery of the stolen property and the apprehension of the thief, "either or both".

NOVEMBER 12, 1867. The Niantic Thread Mill, at the corner of Division and Mulberry Streets, was totally destroyed during a heavy gale. The blaze was believed to have been of incendiary origin. Loss, \$50,000. About eighty employees were thrown out of work.

DECEMBER 5, 1867. An explosion of one of the boilers of the main building of the Globe (Bay State) Print Works on Globe Street (owned by the American Print Works) started a fire which entirely consumed the structure. All buildings in the immediate vicinity were damaged to a greater or lesser extent. No lives were lost, although there were some narrow escapes, and several people were severely injured. About 200 employees were rendered idle.

DECEMBER 15, 1867. About 3:30 Sunday afternoon, during a heavy snow storm, fire was discovered in the new granite structure of the American Print Works, which had just been completed but not yet occupied. The building was 406 feet long and 60 feet in width, with a French roof. In the rear were four wings each about 150 feet long. The fire originated in the engine room, in an old stone building at the rear of the main structure. In

less than four hours the ruin was complete, with a loss of nearly \$1,000,000 and insurance of less than \$100,000, together with the destruction of the Bay State Print Works. The corporation was so badly handicapped for several years that reorganization was necessary. The burned structure was replaced within sixteen months, five hundred operatives meanwhile being deprived of employment.

MAY 14, 1868. The Fall River (White) Mill on Pocasset Street, built in 1827 was destroyed by flames, which broke out in the picker room about 2:30 in the morning. The carpenter shop in an ell at the east was the only portion of the plant to remain intact. Loss, \$120,000, including \$15,000 worth of cotton and five thousand pieces of print cloth.

NOVEMBER 2, 1875. Fire wiped out the Massasoit Cotton Mill on the west side of Davol Street, at the foot of Cherry Street. Loss, \$150,000; insurance \$147,500. This plant was colloquially termed "The Doctor's Mill", being owned and operated by Dr. Nathan Durfee.

JUNE 29, 1876. Mill No. 2 of the American Linen Company, at the foot of Ferry Street, built of granite, with a pitched roof, suffered fire damage in the two upper stories. Loss, \$183,000. In rebuilding the company adopted the flat roof.

NOVEMBER 2, 1877. Early in the morning an explosion, thought to have been due to a leakage of gas during the night, took place in the Border City Mill, No. 1, a brick structure of five stories, followed by fire. The front of the mill burst outwards, damaging the Reindeer ladder truck. Firemen were greatly hampered in fighting the flames, as the first apparatus to arrive could get no water from the hydrants. The mill was speedily reduced to ruins. Loss, \$450,000, fully insured.

NOVEMBER 20, 1878. The Augustus Chace Thread Mill on Globe Street was damaged by fire to the extent of \$50,000, fully insured.

OCTOBER 20, 1882. On Saturday afternoon, fire destroyed the Flint Mill excepting the engine and boiler house. The loss was not estimated; insurance \$620,000. Again the firemen found the water pressure inadequate. Comment was made that the circumstances served to emphasize the need of better water protection in the neighborhood of large manufactories.

APRIL 24, 1884. At 6 P. M. fire started amongst cotton in the basement of Sagamore Mill No. 1, a brick structure, which was destroyed within a few hours. Dense smoke interfered with the efforts of the firemen. Some five hundred operatives were concerned. The loss covered by insurance was \$500,000.

JANUARY 23, 1889. Flames discovered at 3 P. M. damaged the upper story and roof of the Anawan Cotton Mill on Pocasset Street. The loss was \$11,700. A man who was taken out unconscious died soon after.

DECEMBER 30, 1889. A fire occurred above the engine room in the Richard Borden Mill during the afternoon. Captain Squire S. Davis of ladder truck No. 2 suffered serious injury when a hose pipe was wrenched from the grasp of firemen, striking his right leg and causing a fracture. Two amputations were necessary, the second above the knee.

MAY 4, 1892. A picker room fire in the Durfee Mill did \$15,000 damage.

APRIL 20, 1893. The cotton storehouse of the Chace Mill was burned; damage, \$62,000.

JANUARY 1, 1895. Sagamore Mill No. 1 was visited by fire to the extent of \$12,000. Two alarms were sounded and the building was saved from threatened destruction.

JUNE 14, 1895. Fire following a boiler explosion at 8:30 A. M. in the loom harness factory of Henry J. Langley on County Street consumed the entire plant. Four persons perished and many were injured. The loss was \$15,000, partly insured.

FEBRUARY 2, 1928. The disastrous conflagration of 1928 originated in the Pocasset Mill.

JANUARY 29, 1934. The huge Merchants Mill on Fourteenth Street, extending from Pleasant to Bedford Streets was wiped out by a fire that necessitated calling for help from other cities. Seven other buildings were seriously menaced. One man was killed by a falling wall, and several firemen were injured. For two years the structure had been unoccupied. The cause of the fire is unknown. The loss was \$200,000.

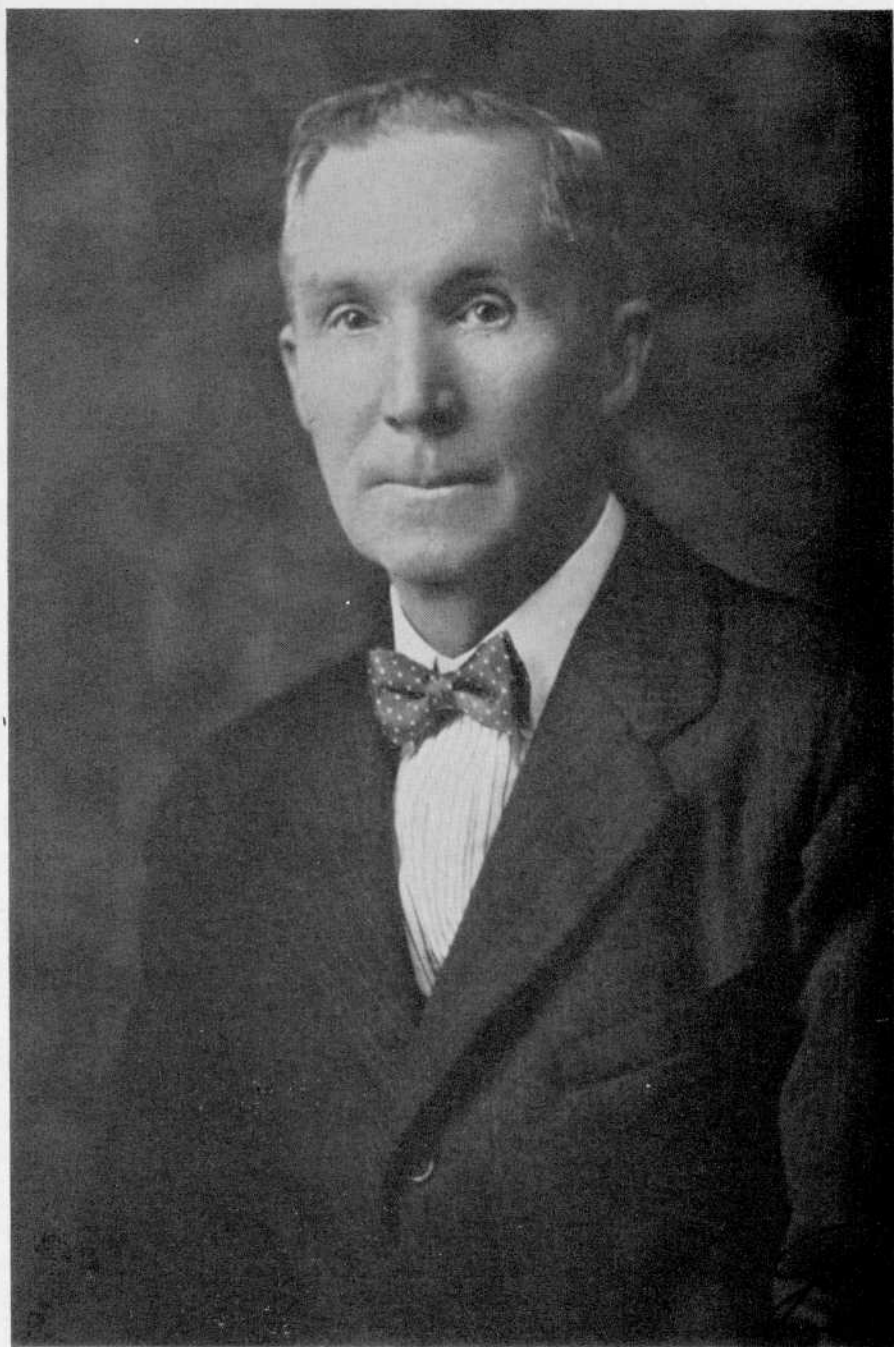
FEBRUARY 6, 1940. Fire destroyed the old Weetamoe Mill owned by the City. The loss estimated at \$450,000, included W. P. A. tools and supplies, and forty tons of Federal surplus foods stored in the building.

MARCH 25, 1940. The former Osborn Mill No. 1 and two dwellings were the prey of flames. Seven other buildings were damaged and forty families driven from their homes. The loss was \$100,000.

JUNE 8, 1940. The old Estes Mill on Sucker Brook was completely destroyed.

### *Labor Unions in Fall River*

We get a picture of the city's life when we learn what its most prominent citizens have accomplished. Those whose biographies have been



JAMES TANSEY



sketched are selected, one from each of several walks in life, because those persons were especially proficient in the work in which they were engaged. Together they present a picture of the city's accomplishments and progress.

The story of the activities of James Tansey is synonymous with the story of the relations between the labor unions of Fall River, in the cotton industry, with the manufacturers.

### JAMES TANSEY

In a manufacturing city, the success or failure of its industry depends largely upon whether undue strife exists between capital and labor, and that in turn depends upon the manner and genuineness of the contact between their representatives.

During the early period of cotton manufacturing in Fall River, there was no organized labor movement, but during the latter part of the last century many unions were formed and several bitter strikes took place.

The most prominent labor representative in recent years has been James Tansey. He was born in Rochdale, Lancashire County, England, on November 15, 1864, came to Fall River in June of 1893 and became a carder in the mill which later was called the Crescent Division of the Merchants Manufacturing Company. Mr. Tansey promptly became a citizen of the United States, and from the first was much interested in and became a leader in labor movements. In January of 1894 Mr. Tansey was elected Secretary of the "Card Room Protective Association". After the lapse of forty-five years he still holds that position. Three years later Mr. Tansey became the president of the Textile Council and he still holds that position. During the labor dispute and strike of 1904 (which lasted for approximately six months and was one of the longest through which the industry suffered), Mr. Tansey was very active. This strike was against a proposed reduction in the wage of all operatives. During the strike and at the request of Governor William L. Douglas (in 1905) Mr. Tansey visited the south and investigated working conditions and wages in that section and his report was fundamental in bringing about a settlement of the controversy. During the years which followed, Mr. Tansey became a political factor. He was appointed a member of the Fall River Police Commission by Governor Douglas in 1905 and served as its chairman for his first term of three years. He was then re-appointed and served another full term and part of a third term until he resigned. In 1901, Mr. Tansey became the first president of the United Textile Workers of America. He served in that capacity until his resignation in 1903. During

the administration of Mayor Amos J. Jackson, Mr. Tansey and the writer were selected to submit to the Mayor recommendations for the organization and administration of a textile school. When the trustees were selected, he was appointed one of the board of trustees, and he is now the only survivor of that original board. He is also Vice President of the school corporation.

In 1916 Mr. Tansey was elected president of the American Federation of Textile Operatives, a national organization, and he still remains president of that board. Mr. Tansey was married in England in January of 1889. His wife died in Fall River in 1932 and out of a large family, he has five sons and three daughters who now survive.

Mr. Tansey's success is largely due to his amiable disposition, his studious approach to textile problems, his accuracy in analyzing a textile situation and his firmness when his position has been established. He is not vociferous, but is a mild mannered, forceful and convincing orator. He is held in high regard by all the operatives and their officials and agents and they all have great confidence in him and high regard for his ability and courage. Those who represent capital also have confidence in his integrity and in his sincerity. He has been an outstanding factor in bringing capital and labor into harmonious relations. His success in this regard has been due to his candor and to the confidence which his judgment commands. A modest demeanor, high moral attributes, a diligence and perseverance mark the rise of James Tansey from modest beginnings to a position of success and power.

### *Strikes*

At various times the cotton industry in Fall River has suffered from inharmonious relations between capital and labor, but with two exceptions this relationship has not resulted in serious violence. There have been many strikes limited to a single or a few corporations, but the two more serious were known as the "mule spinners' strike" which took place in June 1879, a strike of seventeen weeks duration, and the "six months strike" which was ordered by the Fall River Textile Council, a labor organization, on July 25, 1904 and was declared off on January 18th, 1905.

The "mule spinners' strike" was an attempt by the operatives to secure an advance in wage, but at that time the unions were not in financial condition to aid the striking operatives, and that is the reason why it was declared off. Shortly after the termination of the strike, wages were increased in Fall River and the operatives in other cities secured a similar raise.



The "six months strike" was against a proposed twelve and one-half per cent reduction of wages. After the reduction had been ordered, the strike was postponed for two weeks in a hope that the parties would agree. This postponement was requested by the operatives in order that conferences might be held whereby controversies could be adjusted to the mutual advantage of employers and employees, and for the general welfare of the business of the city. On July 25th the manufacturers replied to this request, refusing a change in the effective date of the strike but expressing a willingness for further conferences at any time, whereupon the operatives voted that the strike would be effective on Monday, July 25th. During the eighteen weeks which followed, several conferences were held but no conclusion was reached; then the mill gates were opened but sufficient operatives to operate the plants were not available. Four weeks later, the manufacturers claiming that the leaders of the unions were preventing the operatives from returning to work, the textile council called a meeting of all the locals to take another vote on the strike situation, with the result that the operatives cast a larger vote in favor of continuing the strike than was cast when the strike was declared. During the twenty-fifth week of the strike, Governor William L. Douglas met the representatives of the employers and labor at the State House and after a two days session the parties signed an agreement that the operatives return to work, "all to be put to work where they were employed when the strike began, and no discrimination to be shown". In consideration of this agreement the Governor agreed to investigate the matter of margin of profit in the cotton industry and that he would submit his conclusion as to the average margin and that the manufacturers would pay a dividend of five per cent on the margin which may be shown, up to April 1, 1905, and that the margin fixed by the Governor should in no way prejudice future wage schedules.

Five years before this time a live subject of controversy between capital and labor was the margin of profit which the mills should earn, and what proportion of a fair profit should be allotted to labor. The various labor unions sought to be enlightened upon manufacturing costs in the various mills departments, so that wages could be co-related to the difference between the price of cotton and the seller's price of standard goods. When the manufacturers were loath to disclose these figures or to open their books to the study of the situation by labor accountants, the operatives discussed the feasibility of establishing a mill of their own. The writer was consulted professionally upon this project and papers were drawn for the organization of a co-operative cotton mill to be known as the American Cotton Manu-

facturing Company. On May 12, 1900 the executive committee of the Fall River Textile Council subscribed to the movement, and voted to ask their various organizations to subscribe for stock in the corporation. Subscription books were opened, and option on a mill site secured, but the amount of subscriptions was not sufficient to justify the erection of the mill.

The manufacturers of Fall River have always had available for their plants a plentiful supply of highly skilled labor. A very successful manufacturer, who was then operating plants in three New England and in two southern textile centers, expressed to me his conclusion that in spite of adverse legislation which unreasonably restricted working conditions and increased maintenance costs, the net operative efficiency and cost was not more here than in other centers. The textile industry in Fall River has been less hampered by labor disturbances than in most other textile places. When there were few union operatives, and their organization was incomplete and their financial reserves small, the manufacturers dictated most working conditions, but at the time of the "six months strike" the unions were well organized, each being a branch of the Textile Council and the several mill managers were also associated into a "Manufacturers' Association", so that the Council and the Association together represented the whole local industry. There was no outside interference so that the local leaders were able to consult each other with conviction that if they could agree, their members would confirm their conclusions. During the World War the Manufacturers' Association formed a convenient medium, through which fabrics, needed for war purposes by our government or by the allies, could be contracted for as a single unit and the manufacturing of the same allocated by the president of the Association among the mills which were best equipped to manufacture each particular item. At that time James E. Osborn was the president of the manufacturers' association and he handled their difficult situation and adjusted needs and differences which confronted both parties, with admirable skill.

During these times James Tansey was the executive officer of the Textile Council, — he was always in touch with the entire local mill situation; he could appreciate from years of experience the needs of both parties — he could grasp the crux of a situation from the viewpoint of the manufacturer as well as of the operative, and no problem was so difficult that during the last thirty-five years its difficulties have not been alienated and a major catastrophe averted. In case of stress his working hours have been limited only by the number of hours in the day.