

# The 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Mill 3

The right-hand portion of the *Ben's Uniforms* business on Main Street was originally a textile mill, built in 1820, that is the oldest surviving mill along the Powow River.

by

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Amesbury Carriage Museum  
Amesbury, MA

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# The Ben's Uniforms Buildings

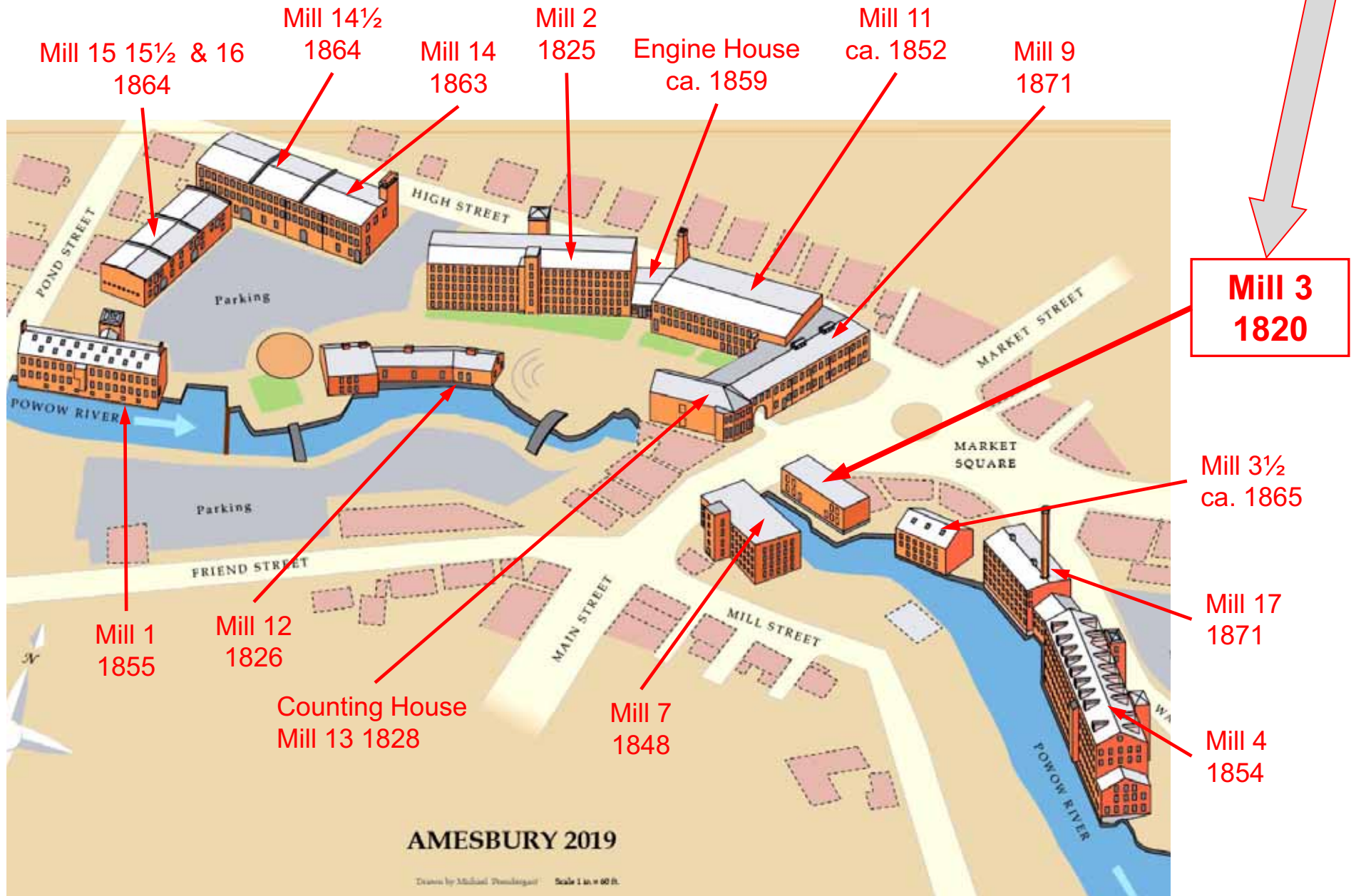
**Hamilton Woolen Mills  
commercial building – ca. 1893**

**Mill 3 - 1820**



# The Powow River Textile Mills As They Appear Today

drawn by Michael Prendergast for Amesbury Carriage Museum  
based on a 1910 map for Hamilton Woolen Mills and using their mill numbering system



## Waterpower At “Amesbury Mills”

Brick buildings in the upper and lower millyards were all originally textile mills, large and highly industrialized for their time. There had been grist mills and sawmills along the Powow since about 1640, plus an iron works on the Salisbury side of the upper yard, similar to the Saugus iron works. They were joined in 1796 by Jacob Perkins' nail factory on the Amesbury side of the upper yard. (The Powow River was the formal dividing line between Amesbury and Salisbury until 1886, when the line was moved a mile east to Rabbit Road.) These operations were all powered by 66 feet of drop in the Powow River over about an eighth of a mile, controlled by a series of five dams. The area was traditionally referred to as “Amesbury Mills” and “Salisbury Mills”, as opposed to “The Ferry” down where the Powow meets the Merrimack River.

No enterprises were involved in manufacturing textiles at the mills for another sixteen years after the nail factory arrived. Numerous operations and machines were required to progress from raw wool and cotton fiber to finished fabric. Performing them on an industrial scale required intimidating levels of technology and capital for early post-Revolutionary America, which still had to compete against English imports.

The 1794 Newburyport Woolen Co. built a three-story mill on Byfield's Parker River having Jacob Perkins' first nail factory on the first floor and powered textile machinery on the top two floors. That had been the site of the Moody family grist mill, and Paul Moody learned weaving there. The mill attracted several English weavers and textile machinery builders who aided in making Perkins' nail machinery, and some of whom came to Amesbury to make textile carding machines. Jacob Perkins brought Paul Moody to Amesbury in 1796 to help build and operate his enlarged nail factory.

# Main Street from Market Square ca. 1870s Showing Original Mill 3

One of few pictures showing complete original Mill 3, with complete original Mill 7 towering behind it.  
At right, the Main Street wing and clock tower of Mill 8 dominate the Market Square area.

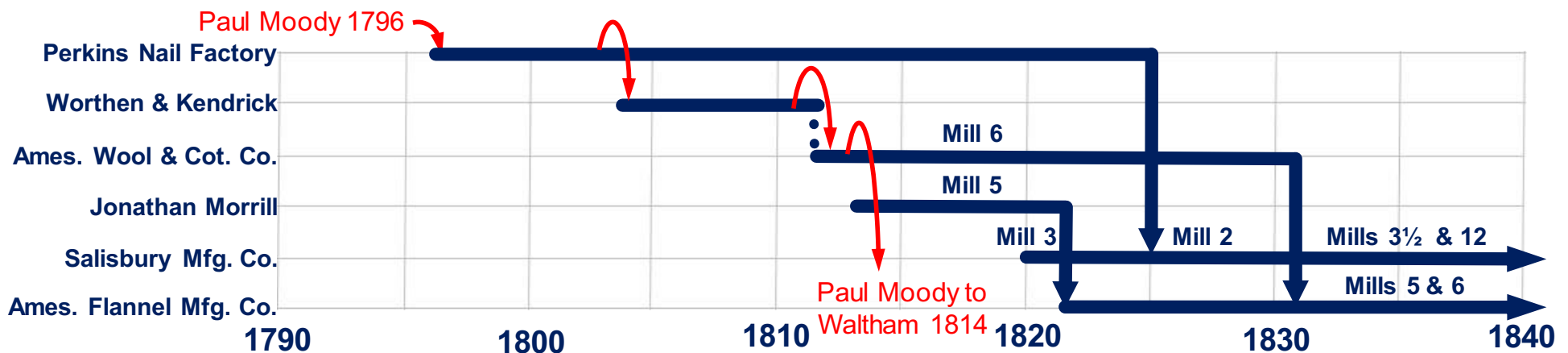
Mill 7  
Mill 3



## Amesbury's Early Textile Manufacturing

Amesbury had the potential for over 1000 horsepower, far beyond what had been available to local textile pioneers back in Byfield. Such power was high enough and the geography was sufficiently compact that the ease of harnessing this potential attracted Boston investors, some of whom had their roots in familiar Newburyport.

Paul Moody came to Amesbury with Jacob Perkins, and then became involved with Ezra Worthen of Amesbury in a carding machine distribution business. Worthen's and Moody's 1812 Amesbury Wool & Cotton Factory was the origin of Mill 6, Amesbury's first textile mill. The original Mill 5 was started the next year by Jonathan Morrill and his two sons. In 1814 Moody became chief mechanic at the Boston Manufacturing Co. of Waltham, creating America's first fully powered textile mill. Mills 5 & 6, the first two of the Amesbury textile mills, were purchased in 1821 and 1831 respectively by the newly formed Amesbury Flannel Manufacturing Company, owned by brothers Amos & Abbott Lawrence of Boston, investors in the Boston Manufacturing Co. and developers of Lawrence, Massachusetts during the 1840s. They expanded Mills 5 & 6 in several steps, building a successful business that introduced America's first powered wool looms in 1823.



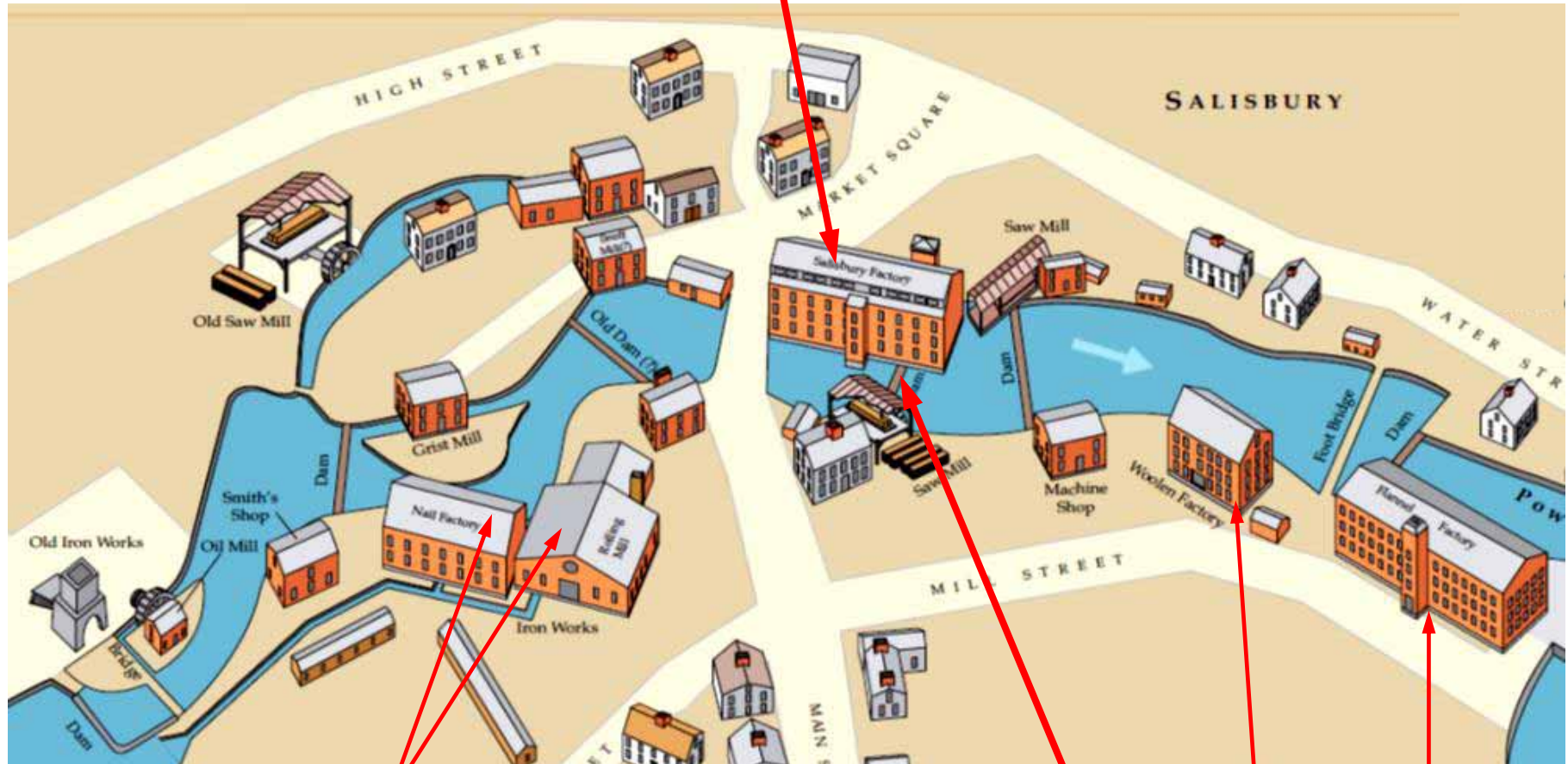
# Mill #3 Joins a Growing Group of Early Powow River Textile Mills

drawn by Michael Prendergast for Amesbury Carriage Museum

based on an 1825 map made for proprietors of the Nail Manufacturing Company

**Mill 3  
1820**

Mill 3 was the third textile mill built along the Powow River, and the first on the Salisbury side.



**Jacob Perkins'  
Nail Factory 1796**

**Mill 3  
dam**

**Mill 6  
1812**

**Mill 5  
1813**

## The Salisbury Manufacturing Company and Mill 3

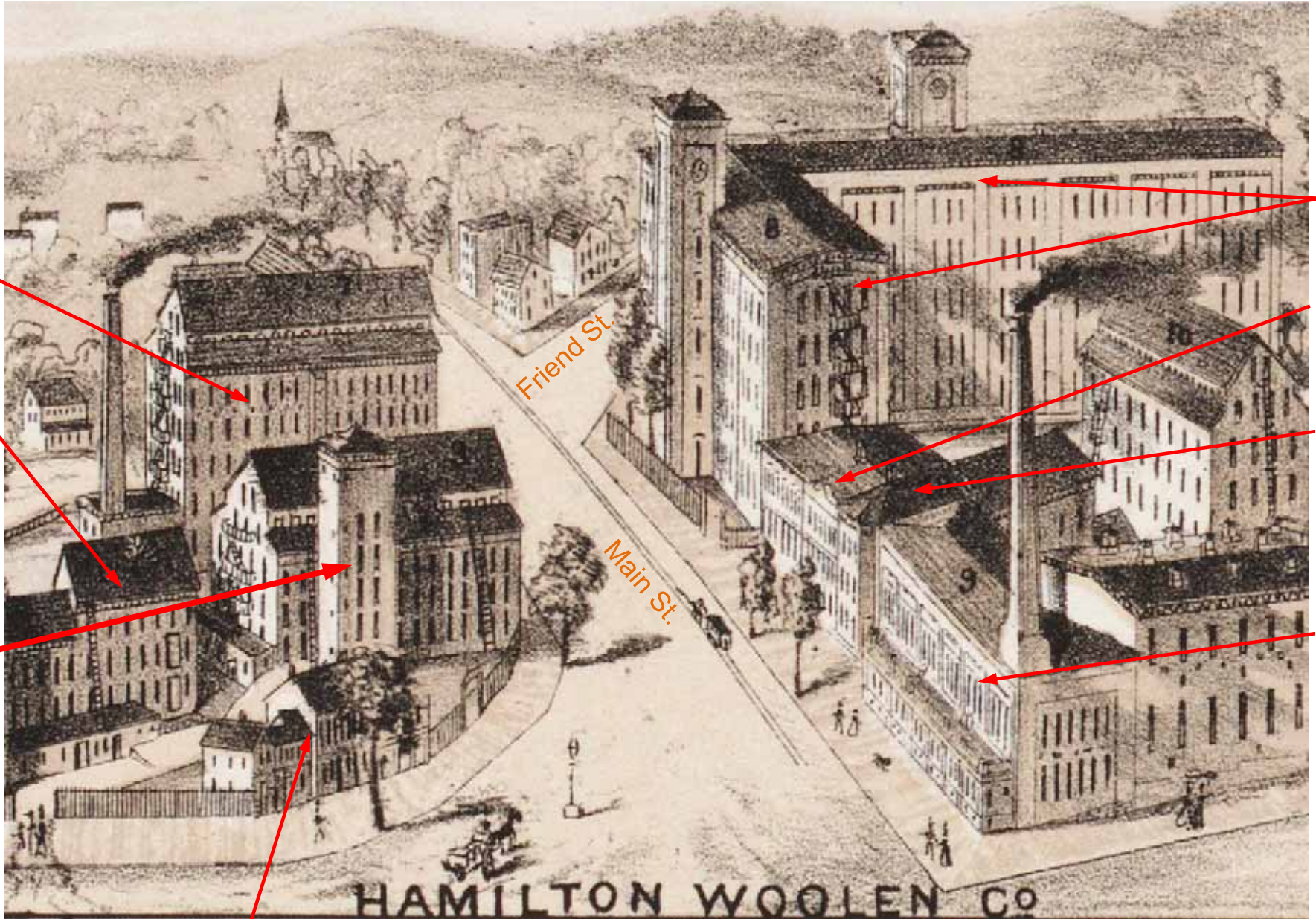
Developing regional waterpower was rapidly industrializing New England. In 1820 a group of investors from Newburyport, Salem, and Boston created the Salisbury Manufacturing Company, building the first textile mill on the Salisbury side of the river. With a substantial capitalization of \$500,000 (perhaps \$75 million today) they built large Mill 2 (Amesbury Industrial Supply) in 1825, purchasing at the same time the Perkins nail factory. By 1836 they employed 200 males and 300 females, being a much larger enterprise than the Amesbury Flannel Mfg. Co. in Mills 5 & 6 on the Amesbury side. Salisbury's first mill building, from back in 1820, eventually became known as Mill 3.

Salisbury Manufacturing Co. grew into the main textile concern in town, absorbing the Amesbury Flannel Mfg. Co. in 1853. With the economic Panic of 1857, they reorganized as the Salisbury Mills Company. Wool fabric contracts for Civil War uniforms and subsequent expansion after the war brought the company by 1870 to an employment of 1300 with annual sales of \$2 million on a capitalization of \$1 million and having nine water wheels and six steam engines producing 750 horsepower. Continued expansion through a quarter-million-dollar improvement campaign included several large new boiler houses and the dam that created Lake Gardner in 1872. This perhaps left them short on cash just as the Credit Moblier scandal of 1872 ushered in the Panic of 1873, followed by the longest recession in American history. During the 1876 Centennial, worsening business conditions closed the textile mills for 4 years, from mid-1876 into mid-1880. At that point Mill 3 had a battery of cotton cleaning, carding, and spinning equipment and a cotton-picking room in a wood extension out back, plus fire sprinklers on all floors running on rotary pumps, all powered by a Kilburn water turbine in the basement,



# Mill-Owned Buildings Around Market Square in 1880

Hamilton Woolen Company had bought the entire mill complex that year and had begun refurbishing obsolete buildings and machinery. All buildings shown below between Friend St. and Market Square, including the hidden Arcade Building, were owned by the textile company.



Mill 7

Mill 3 1/2

Mill 3

Mill 8

PO Bldg.

Mill 13

Mill 9

Friend St.

Main St.

HAMILTON WOOLEN CO

## The Back Addition of Mill 3 (right) & Dam for Mills 3 and 7

Water is flowing over the dam and under the Arcade Building, which rests on pilings in the river. This scene would have been little changed (except for the hanging wires) from any time after about 1880 until 1916.

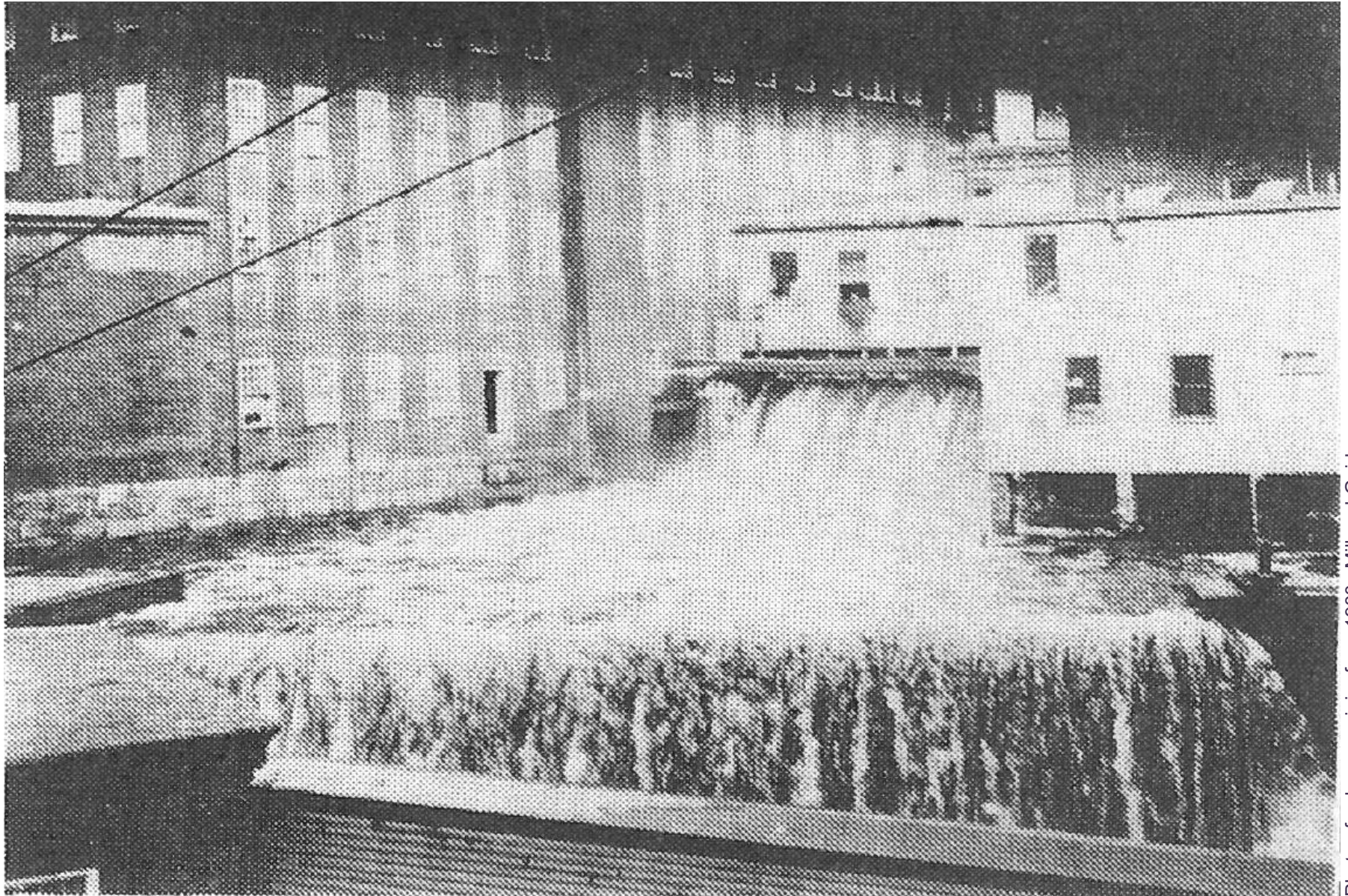


Photo of unknown origin, from 1980s Millyard Guide

## Mill 3 Under the Hamilton Woolen Company

With a rising economy in 1880 the entire Amesbury mill complex was purchased for \$300,000 by the Hamilton Woolen Company, having Boston owners and existing mills in Southbridge, Massachusetts. They quickly began improving buildings and purchasing new equipment, as there was much that had become obsolete and inefficient. Mills 1, 6, and 7 were first gotten to producing wool fabrics as work also went into increasing cotton processing. To that end, several years went into installing looms and large new steam engines into Mills 2, 4, & 8, which were joined in cotton work by Mill 5. By 1883, Hamilton had expended another \$600,000, double the original purchase price.

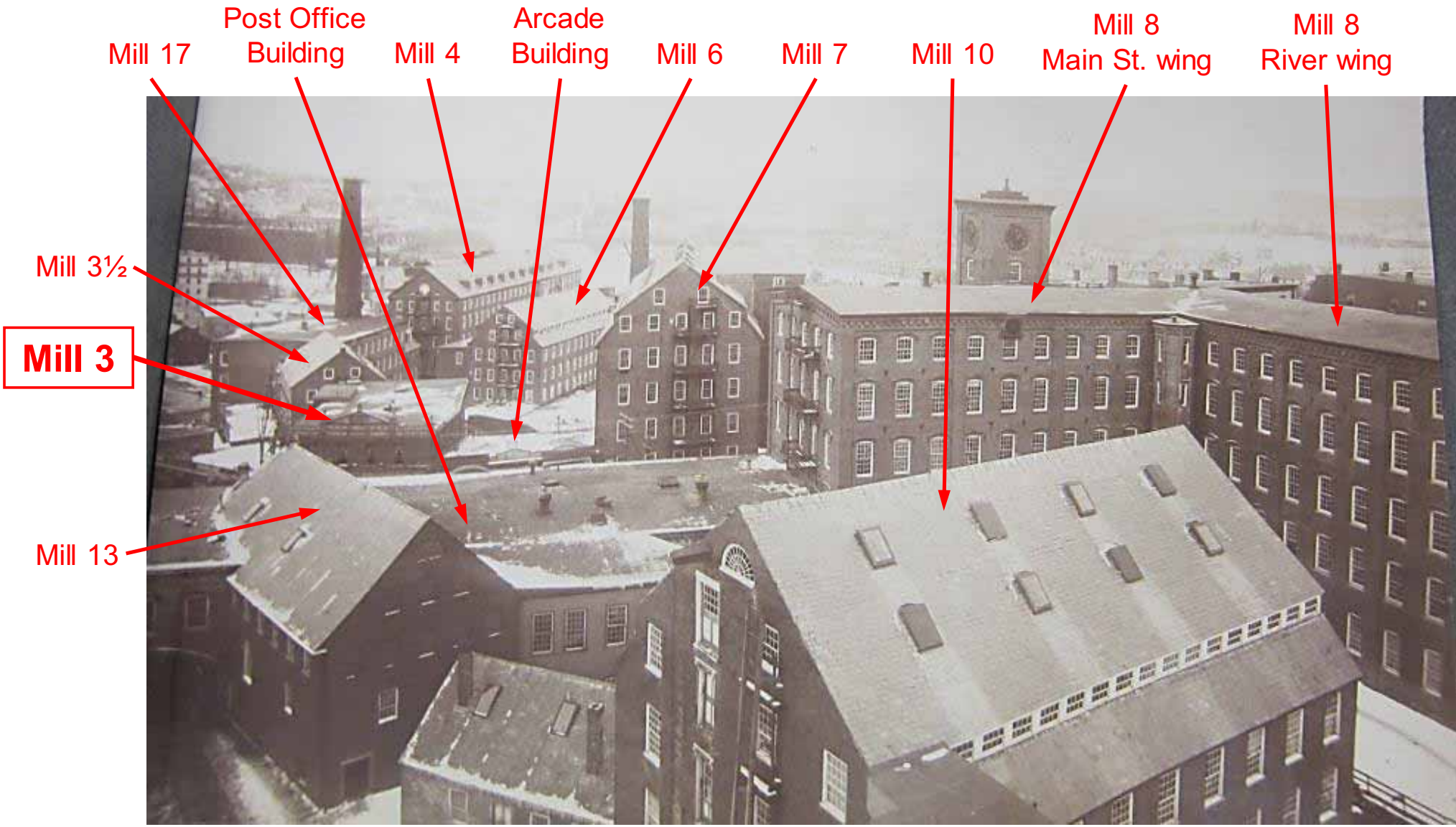
The complex involved far more than the brick mills, starting miles north with water and management rights in southern New Hampshire, including Tuxbury Pond, Kimball Pond (Lake Attitash), Kingston Pond, and Country Pond. There were extensive row houses for mill operatives in the neighborhoods around Aubin and Dublin Streets, as well as a boarding house on Mill Street. Also owned were all of the commercial buildings in the first block of Main Street, including along the southwest curve from Mill 3 into Water Street.

When Salisbury Mills Co. built the large 1871 boiler house in Market Square (Mill 9), the frontage had a row of wooden storefronts called Merchants Row (see 1880 aerial view) that existed into the 1980s. In 1872 they built the Arcade Building and the Post Office building, both right over the river. In 1882 the new Hamilton owners built an extension on the back of the Post Office building. In 1883, Hamilton planned storefront windows for Mill 3 to house Charles Wing Hardware on the first three floors, but Wing Hardware was burned out of their existing home in 1884 and then moved into the first two floors of Mill 17. Mill 3 was never reactivated as a textile mill after 1876, instead being used for wool storage and then becoming another of Hamilton's Main St. retail storefront buildings.

# Mill 3 Among the Total Group of Textile Mills ca. 1900

seen from the stairwell of Mill 2 (Amesbury Industrial Supply)

Mill building population is at its peak, with large Mills 7 & 8 dominating Main Street. Mill 3 is seen in its first phase of being cut down, reduced here to two stories. Between Mills 3 & 7 can be seen the roof of the Arcade Building, located right over the river.



## Mill 3 After 1880

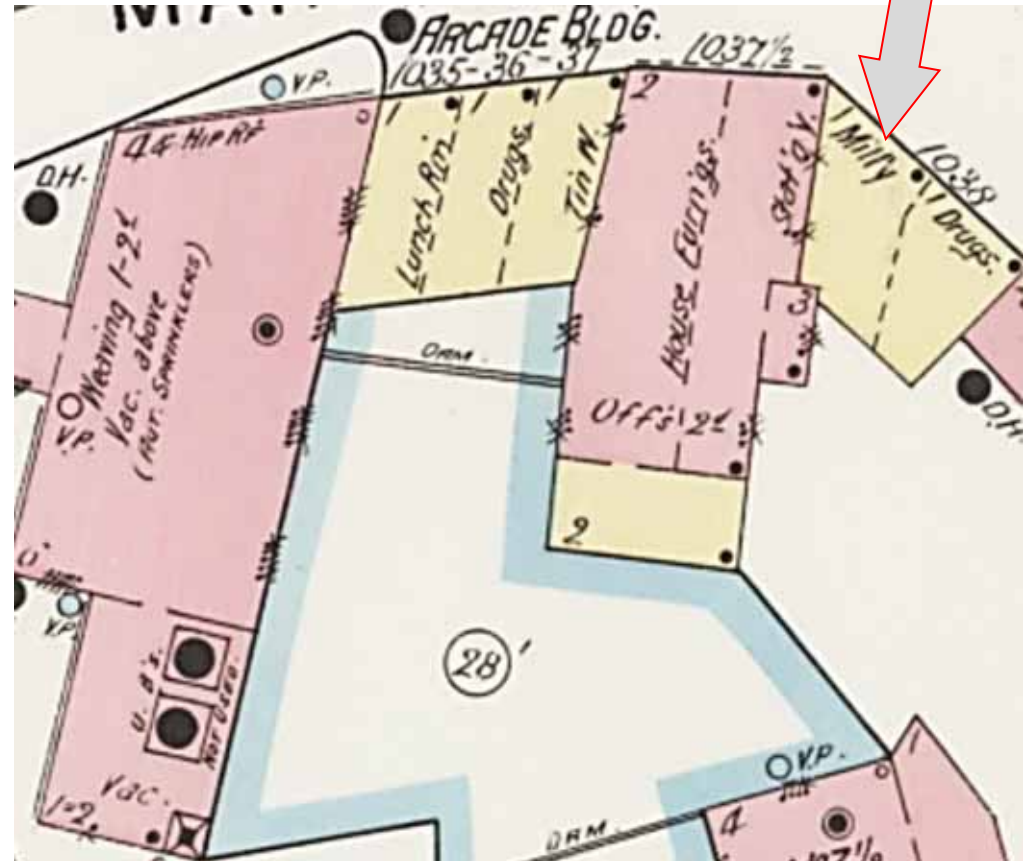
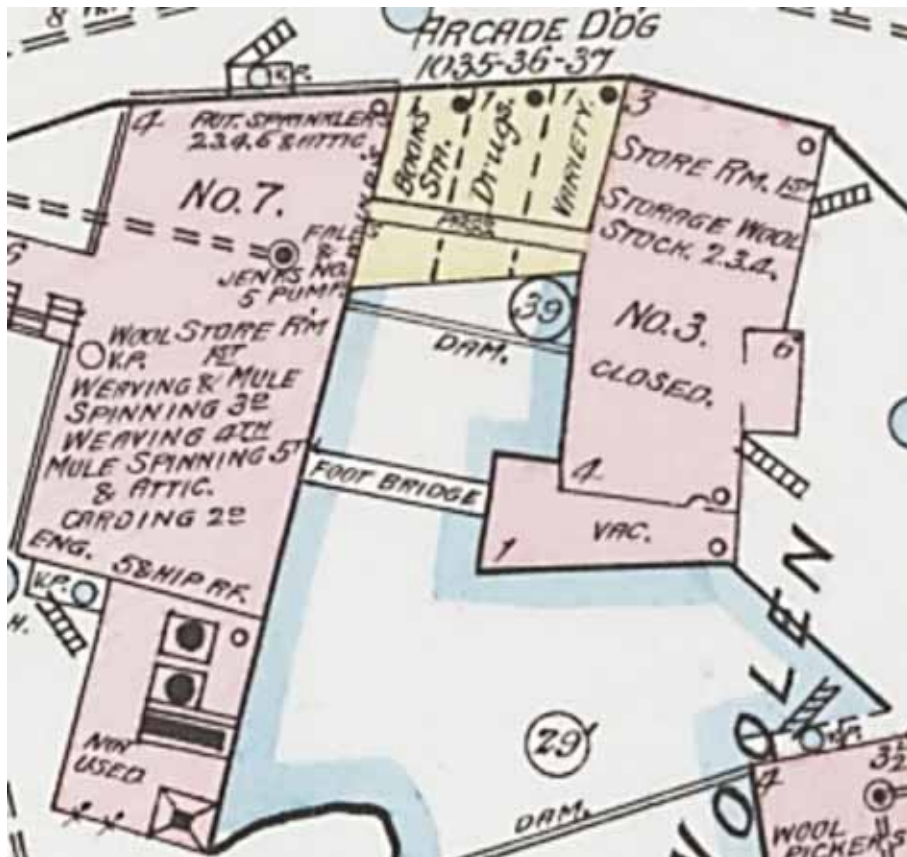
In 1885 the Hamilton Woolen Co. was using Mill 3 simply for storage of woolen stock. That was doomed in 1887 when Hamilton decided to phase out wool processing through 1888 and focus on cotton fabrics, at which point the fate of Mill 3 was a lesser concern. The greater issue was that Mills 1 and 7 went fallow, large Mill 1 becoming entirely vacant from 1889 until the mills closed in 1912. Mill 3½ went vacant after about 1900. In parallel, Mill 7 continued with weaving on its first two floors, while upper four floors remained vacant until mill closing. At the same time, Mill 6 was leased off-and-on (as much off as on) to carriage related business. Overall, Amesbury textile production was becoming non-competitive and running downhill after the mid-1880s.

Outside of textiles, the general economy was booming into the 1890s, keeping local carriage makers busy and the town prosperous. It was likely under these conditions that the mills increased their commercial retail properties. Probably in 1892, prior to a major economic crash in 1893, they completed their arc of Market Square buildings curving around the south side of Main Street into Water Street. The gap next to Mill 3 was filled with a new double storefront. Mill 3 was fitted with double glass storefronts on the first floor, offices on the second floor, and the top two floors were removed. Converting to a more non-industrial image, a decorative wood façade was added on the top frontage.

After several tenant changes during the turbulent economy, the street level of Mill 3 settled into having a branch of Haverhill's Fred W. Peabody piano and organ store on the right side and a bookstore on the left.

# Mill 3 in 1889 and 1894

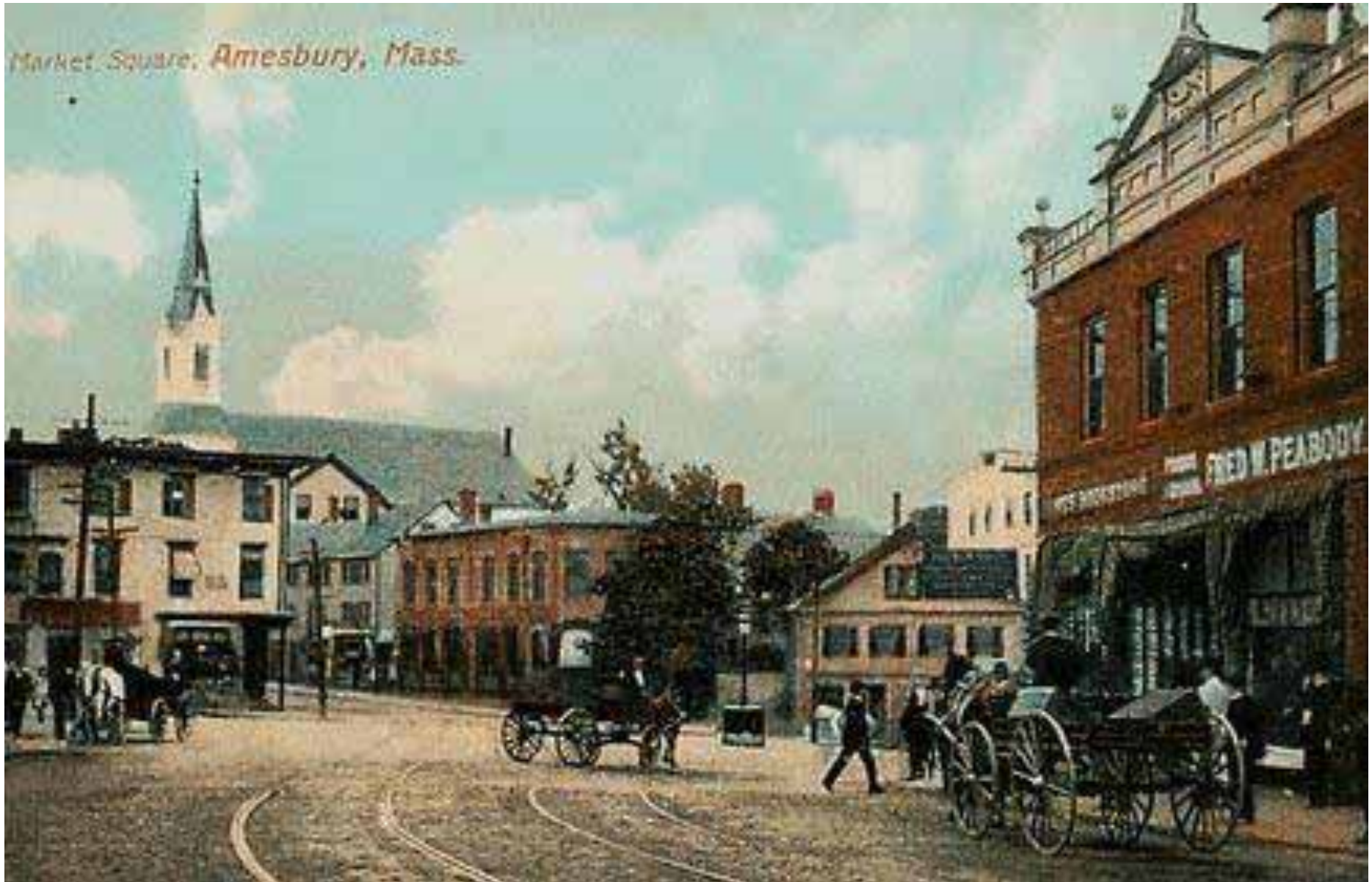
Sanborn insurance maps below (1889 on left, 1894 on right) show that in 1889 Mill 7 was still processing wool on all floors, and wool was stored in Mill 3. (it can be seen that boilers, an engine, and a smokestack behind Mill 7 were no longer in use) Facilitating those functions, the mills were connected by a footbridge and some sort of passage across the river, the latter passing above the Arcade Building. By 1894, Mill 7 had weaving on the first two floors and was vacant above, while Mill 3 had a home furnishings store at street level and offices on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, with no floors existing above that. Mill 3 has been cut down and another building now abuts it on the right.



Sanborn Map & Publishing Co., New York, Jan. 1889 pg. 3, Aug. 1894 pg. 6

## Looking Along Main Street into Market Square ca. 1900

Mill 3 at far right, reduced to two stories and with a decorative wood façade on top. The bookstore of John French Johnson is on its left side, while the piano and organ shop of Fred W. Peabody is on the right. The second floor contains offices and across Market Square is the Allen family Greek revival storefront.



## A New Life of Retail Commerce, and Change

The economy began recovering from its slump during the late 1890s (the Dow-Jones stock index was invented at that time to measure the rising stock market), as the new Mill 3 greeted the new century. Amesbury native John J. Allen purchased the Mill 3 bookstore (which had expanded into stationery and office-related paper products) in 1908 after a career in the town's then-fading carriage industry. His family had long operated a grocery and hardware business in the Greek-revival storefront shown on the previous page across Market Square from his new bookstore. Allen increased the business scope into newspapers and news distribution, and in publishing Amesbury-related picture post cards and memorabilia.

Hamilton Woolen Co. closed the Amesbury mills permanently in 1912 with virtually all the original buildings intact 100 years after Mill 6 was built. Its age was apparently a liability rather than an asset, for Hamilton tore down Mill 6 in 1915 while negotiating with buyers. The complete complex then passed to a new entity called the Merrimac Valley Power and Buildings Company, which was essentially an electric power utility based on the Powow River's available horsepower, as well as renting industrial space in the mill buildings. The Mill 6 site, on Mill St. where the transformer station is now, then received a new turbo-generating station for the power utility.

Mill 3 was thus elevated to the second oldest mill in town with little change to its daily existence as a commercial storefront. Its environs remained relatively unchanged until 1928 when the large Main St. wing of Mill 8 across the street was demolished, making way for a new set of 2-story front to back storefronts.



## View Up Main Street from Market Square ca. 1915-1920

Mill 3 is at far left, still with the Fred W. Peabody shop. The previous bookstore on its left side is now occupied by John J. Allen's newspaper and stationery store. The façade of the Arcade Building, containing three stores, can be seen between Mills 3 and 7, the latter still at its full height.



## Main Street from Market Square - 1930s

The large white lettered sign for John J. Allen News Agency is clearly visible at center, on the side of Mill 3. Mill 7 and Mill 8 continue to dominate Main Street well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, although the Main St. wing of Mill 8 had been removed and replaced by today's group of storefronts.



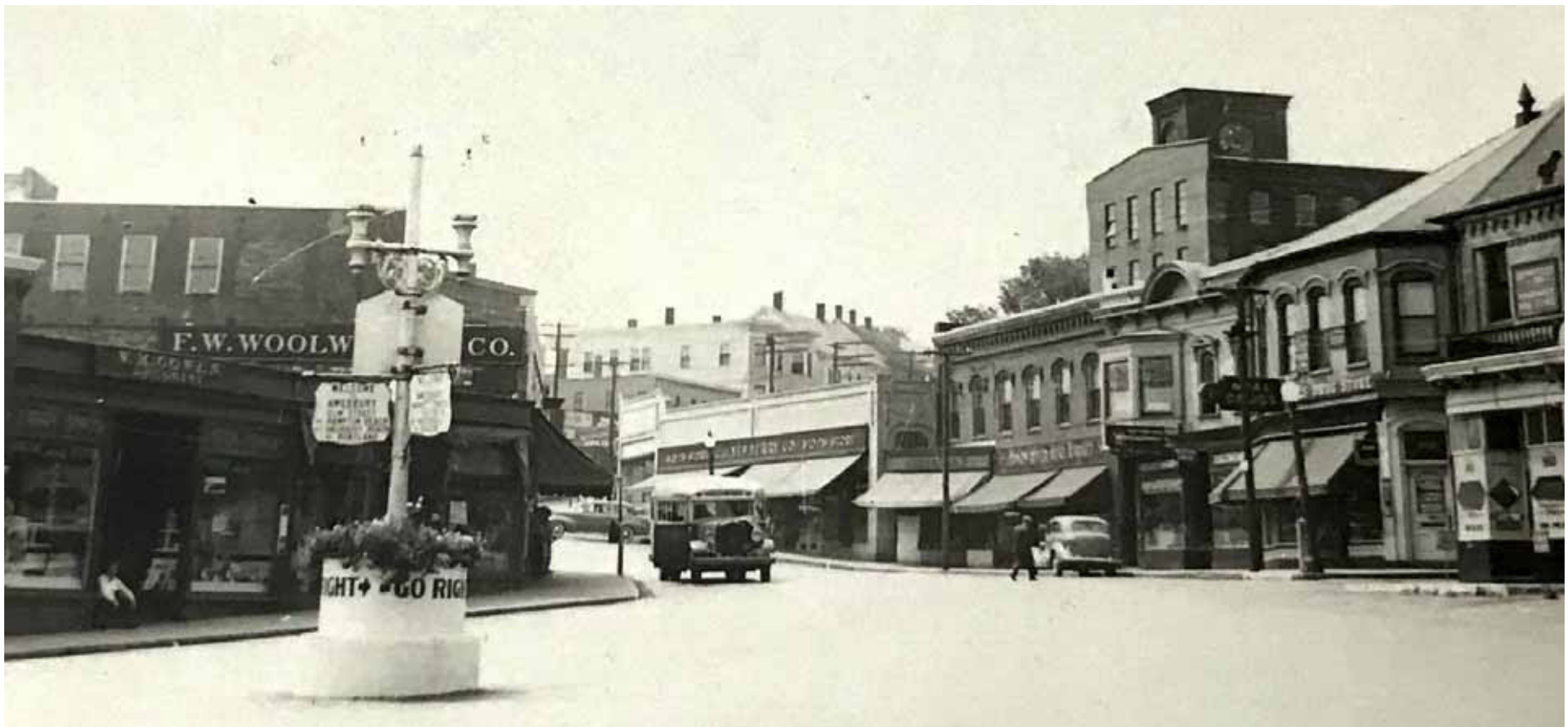
## More Change

1928 changes to Mill 8 were followed by the economic crash of 1929, stirring additional demolitions to reduce tax and maintenance burdens on underutilized buildings. Mills 10 and 5 were razed sometime in the early 1930s, the latter bringing Mill 3 to its status as the oldest surviving Amesbury textile mill. Sometime in the 1930s the upper two stories of Mill 7 were also removed, which together with the reduction of Mill 8 widened the horizons around Main Street and Mill 3.

Mill 3 physical conditions remained relatively stable through the 1930s, the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor noted as being occupied by a “club”. That was the Amesbury Club, which had used that location for over 40 years, stemming from a Point Shore boat club that had been displaced in 1893 by a flood and an economic crash. They were again displaced in 1941, along with Allen’s bookstore (both found new space), when Mill 3 was leased to the F. W. Woolworth Company. It was then connected to the adjacent building in the “Hamilton block” to create a larger street level retail space.

## Main Street from Market Square - 1940s

Mill 3, far left, houses Woolworth department store, while Mill 7 has been reduced in height so that it no longer looms over Market Square. Starting in 1880, Woolworth was among the earliest and most successful of the five-and-dime department stores, that price point being more significant when the average daily wage was \$2. They created diversified merchandising of common consumer products in small-town and big-town America with such success that Frank Woolworth purchased a full city block in lower Manhattan and constructed the world's tallest skyscraper (The Woolworth Building), totally with cash. In this picture, there has been some modification to the front of the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor of Mill 3, but it still seems largely intact.



## Arriving at the Present

With changing market conditions as malls were a widening new trend, Woolworth closed the 9000 square foot Amesbury store on Christmas Eve, 1958. The building sat empty until late 1961 when an Aubuchon hardware store opened there. The Fitchburg based company at that time had about 60 store locations in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont. Aubuchon remained until the 1980s, into the period of the upper millyard restoration, when Ben's men's store opened in Mill 3. Somewhere in those two transitions the remainder of the second floor was removed, so that it is now a one-story building.

With dramatic architectural changes and well over a century as a retail space, Mill 3's decades as an operating water-powered textile mill have largely been lost in the historical fog. Along with that, its more modern frontage has effectively camouflaged the age and function of the structure. But now in 2020 we can rightfully offer Mill 3 a happy 200<sup>th</sup> birthday for its long and varied career at the center of Amesbury.