



The Docks of Amesbury and Salisbury Mills

by

Tom Murphy

ACM Industrial Survey Team Volunteer

**With research assistance from Steve Klomps
ACM Industrial Survey Team Volunteer**

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When most of us think of boats and Amesbury, we think of Point Shore along the Merrimac River where through the 18th and 19th Centuries, hundreds of wooden ships were built. We remember because Alliance Park is named for a famous ship built near there, and the Lowell Boat Shop still builds boats on the shore of the Merrimac.



Figure 1: "The Schooner Polly Ashore"

But if you had been walking through Market Square in 1805, you might have heard the sound of mallets knocking together the schooner *Polly* (Figure 1) in Richard Currier's shipyard on the landing at the end of Currier Street, named for the shipyard.¹ This sixty-ton coaster continued to sail until 1918. Starting in the 17th century, ships were built in the tidewater area below the falls along both sides of the Powow. According to Duane Hurd's 1880 *History of Essex County*, the last ship was built there by Samuel Fal-lonsbee in 1835. Completed ships were floated down the Powow. Hurd introduces his discussion of shipbuilding on the Powow with, "Strange as it may seem to the current generation,"² signaling that even in 1880, the memory of that important industry in Amesbury and Salisbury Mills was fading.

1 Cheney, Robert K., "Maritime History of the Merrimac : Shipbuilding." 172-73.

2 Hurd, *History of Essex County, Massachusetts*. Vol 2: 1464.

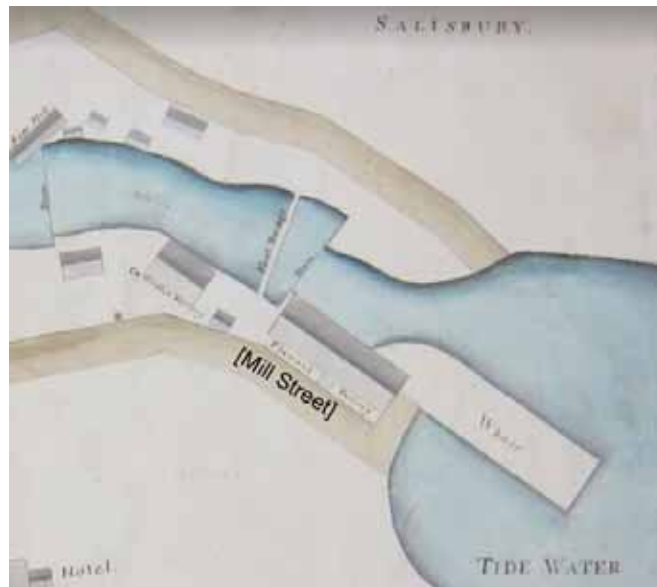


Figure 2: “Plan of the Land and Buildings of the Nail Manufacturing Co.”

In the 18th and early 19th centuries, waterways provided an important transportation network, and in addition to the power of the Powow’s falls, the tidewater at the base of those falls connected the town with the Merrimac River and Newburyport and the world. A map of the Amesbury (southern) side of the Powow falls area drawn up in 1825 (Figure 2) includes a wharf in the tidewater just below the flannel factory. In addition, the area near where Currier built ships persisted as the town Landing³.

A retrospective article written in 1895 describes a building that does not show on the map.

In 1824 near the site of the “Landing” . . . and built upon mud sills high up from the flow of the tide, was a commodious four story store-house where a large portion of the wool and merchandise of the Amesbury Woolen Company was placed, the same being brought up the river from the Merrimac landings where it was consigned in ships from Boston. This freight material was placed on board large flat-bottomed boats of from 15 to 20 ton capacity and taken up the river and floated under the lower story of the warehouse at high water, and unloaded directly into the building without much labor.⁴

A detail from an 1839 engraving of the Mills Village (Figure 3), which shows both Mill No. 2 and the Flannel Mill, also shows, in the lower left-hand corner, two buildings on stilts over the water. The one on the left has four stories.

³ Ibid.

⁴ WHBC, “Shipbuilding”

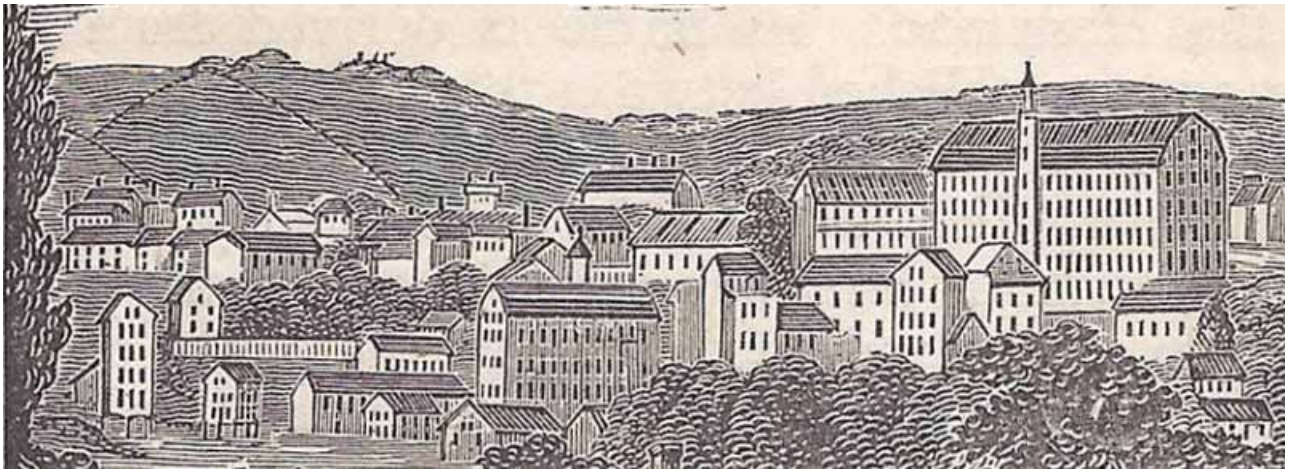


Figure 3: Detail of Barber, South-East View of Mills Village, in Salisbury and Amesbury.

Amesbury sold its landing to the Salisbury Manufacturing Co. in the early 1850's, but the 1854 Clark map (Figure 4) still shows the 1824 warehouse over the water at the end of Mill Street.



Figure 4: Woodford, E. M., "Map of the Towns of Salisbury & Amesbury."

The flat-bottomed boats that slipped under the warehouse would most likely have been gundalows or gondolas (see Figure 5), which used the tides, oars and poles, and sails to move up and down the rivers as tidal flow changed direction. The short-masted lateen sails, weighted at the end to swing up and down, allowed them to slip under low bridges.



57. MERRIMACK RIVER GUNDALOW

Figure 5: Davis, Charles G., "Shipping & Craft in Silhouette; Drawings and Text."

Robert Patten, who was a farmer and a brick maker in Amesbury and after whom Patten's Pond is named, owned a gondola,⁵ one that was possibly involved the September 6, 1827 drowning of Richard Jackson "by being knocked with an oar from on board a Gondola"⁶ on Patten's Creek, a tributary of the Powow.

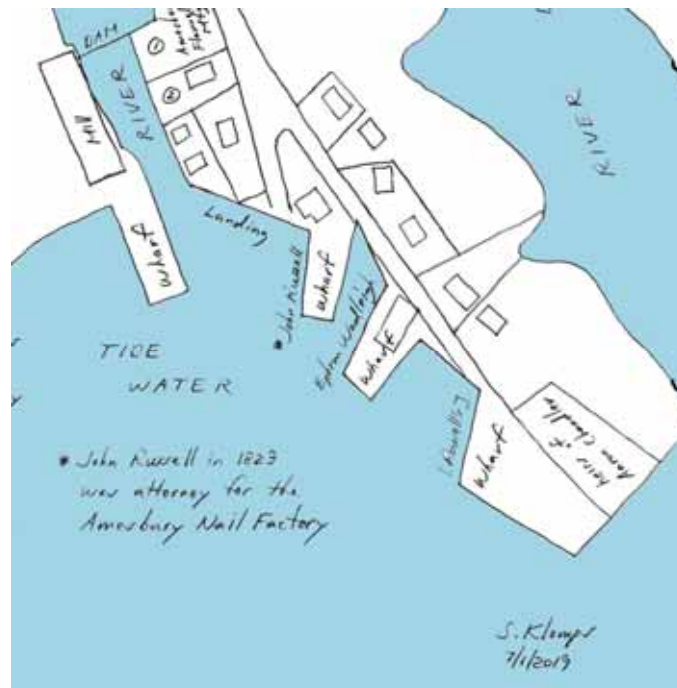


Figure 6: Klomps, Steve, "Detail. Salisbury Mills Landing Circa 1823."

⁵ "Valuation Lists, Amesbury MA."

⁶ "Drowned [Robert Jackson]."

Steve Klomps has reconstructed the the arrangement of the landing and three wharves around 1823 (Figure 6) on the Salisbury Mills landing (north) side of the Powow tidewater. According to the *History of Essex County*, in the early days of the town, “great quantities of lumber and staves were shipped, and the lumber trade alone employed quite a force of men.”⁷ In addition to wool, the Powow River was transportation resource for other bulk items like iron, coal, bark, hides, salt grass, and stone, and West India goods.⁸

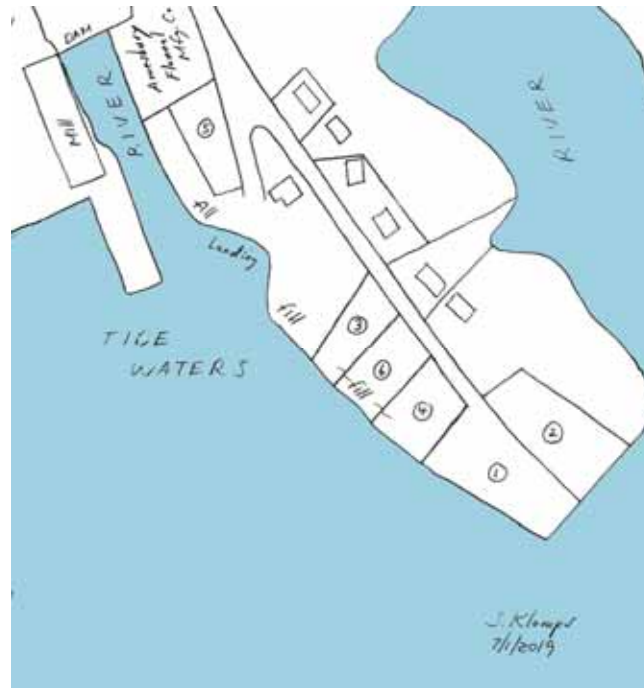


Figure 7: Klomps, Steve, “Detail. Salisbury Mills Landing, Deeds 1826-1830.”

The textile boom came to Salisbury Mills in 1825 with the building of Mill No. 2 by the Salisbury Manufacturing Co. By 1830 the wharf area of the Powow Tide Water had changed radically as the later map (Figure 7) shows. Land along the river was filled in to enlarge the upper landing area and the landing near the Back River was consolidated under the ownership of the Salisbury Manufacturing Co. (Plots 1 and 2).

When the railroad came to Amesbury and Salisbury Mills in 1847, shipping by water continued, but the speed and reliability of rail transportation would have reduced its importance. The disappearance of substantial shipping on the Powow must have preceded the 1850’s since by then the bridge at its mouth was rebuilt without a draw,⁹ which would have restricted Powow River traffic to gundalows and other small craft.

On the 1872 map (Figure 8), Salisbury Manufacturing still owned the Landing where the Back River meets the Powow (O. Boardman owns the house next to it). Just inside the Back River, Biddle and Cadieu had a woodworking operation, and by the 1890’s this area is variously called the Biddle’s Wharf and the Back Landing.

⁷ Hurd, *History of Essex County, Massachusetts*. 1464

⁸ “Powow River Navigation.”

⁹ “Powow River Navigation.”



Figure 8: “Amesbury Center, Salisbury Mills, Atlas.1872”

By the 1880’s both carriage and textile manufacturing were growing in Amesbury and Salisbury Mills, and in 1885, the US Army Corps of Engineers reported to Congress on a study of a proposed Powow River dredging project that would “considerably facilitate the manufacturing business of these towns by cheapening the transportation of materials and finished products now carried by rail.”¹⁰ The towns agreed to rebuild the draw bridge at the mouth of the Powow.

When the Corps surveyed residents about the history of the Powow, those residents blamed saw dust from saw mills being washed down river for reducing the depth of the Powow. When the engineer, Sophus Haagensen, actually examined the river bottom, he found no sawdust.

The bottom of the channel is generally coarse sand, with some mud and clay or gravel intermixed. I do not think the depth has been much greater in recent times; remembering that vessels formerly were of slight draught compared to what they are now, considerable navigation might have been possible; the largest vessel built was, according to the best information, not over 300 tons, and that might be launched and floated in the present channel on a spring tide.¹¹

It took until 1891 for the rotating swing bridge across the Powow to be completed¹², but in November of 1896, when the dredger was ready to start work on the river, the bridge was jammed and would not open. The dredging took place, and though it was not entirely completed by 1900¹³, it did open up the

10 Engineers, 48th Congress, 2nd Session, House of Representatives, Ex. Doc. No. 179. p. 5

11 *Ibid.*

12 “Main Street Bridge - HistoricBridges.Org.”

13 “Powow Dredging.” 2

river for more traffic. For example, in July of 1897, the Powow was deep enough to allow for an excursion on a steamboat from the Back Landing on the Powow River to Black Rocks near Salisbury Beach at the mouth of the Merrimac (Figure 9).

NOTICE.

Powow River Excursion.

Come and take the first steamboat excursion ever made from Amesbury by way of Powow River to Black Rocks.

Steamer Eleanor May

Capt J. F Tilton.

SATURDAY, JULY 27.

Will leave Back Landing at 8 o'clock a m, returning at 6 p m also Sunday, July 25th, will leave at 8 30 a m.

Fare for round trips 25c.

Figure 9: "Eleanor May Notice."

Though the two planned trips seemed to be a big success, things did not work out for Captain Tilton since by July 29, the steam boat had been attached by someone in Haverhill where it was being held.¹⁴

Ironically, the dredging was completed just in time for the beginning of the decline of both the textile and the carriage industries in Amesbury. Ultimately, the main commodity shipped up the Powow was coal. During May of 1909, for example, the draw bridge over the Powow was raise 26 times for the tug *Hazel Dell* hauling scows containing 800 tons of coal to E. H. Alexander and 750 tons of screenings from the Hamilton Woolen Company.¹⁵

There are few remaining signs that the Powow River was part of a transportation network vital to the prosperity of the city and that before Amesbury and Salisbury Village made carriages and automobile bodies, they made wooden ships. In 1964, when Robert Cheney was writing about the history of shipbuilding on the Powow, he noted that in 1812 the privateer Decatur "was launched at the Mills landing in the rear of what is now Amesbury Square. There would be trouble launching anything larger than a rowboat there today."¹⁶ Once again, this current generation would think it strange that boats would be coming and going up and down the Powow, but knowing the way our ancestors in this place lived enriches our lives and deepens our understanding of the natural and built landscape. It also raises the question of what part of our lives will be invisible to our descendants in future Amesbury.

14 "Eleanor May Attached."

15 "Report of Draw-Bridge Tender."

16 Cheney, Robert K., "Maritime History of the Merrimac : Shipbuilding." 175

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