



Swan Song: The Derby Strike Riot

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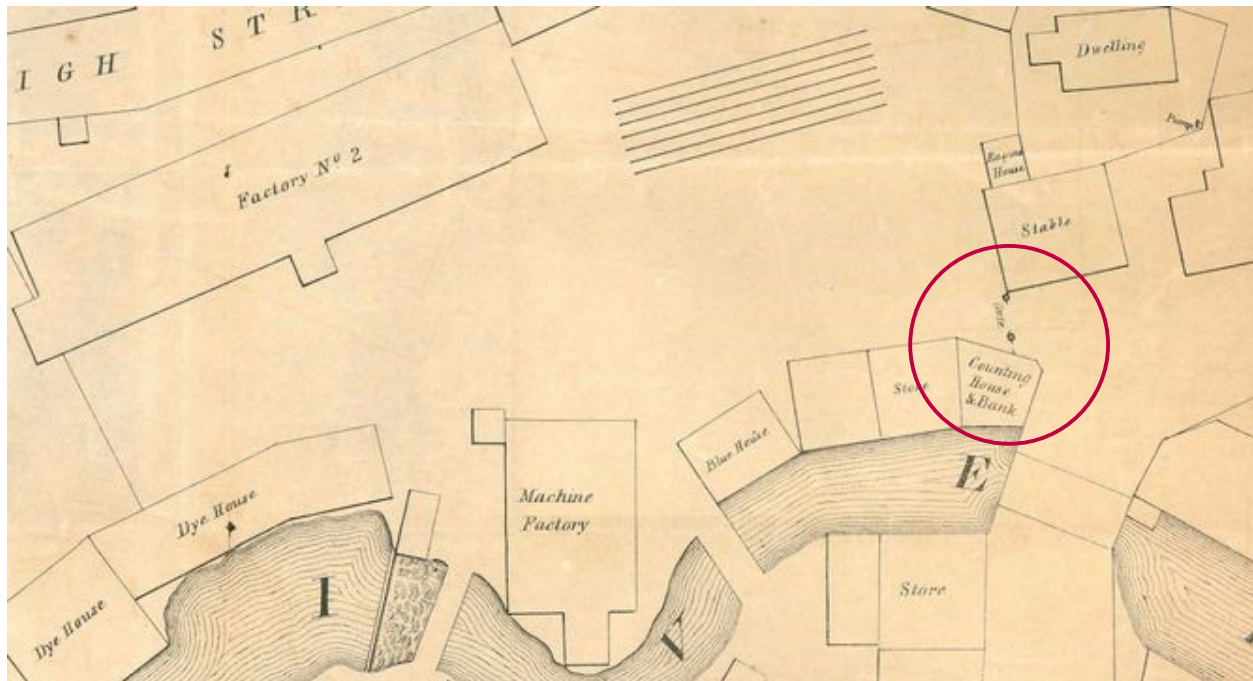
On June 29, 1852, Austin Swan, a not-quite-nineteen-year-old operative at the Salisbury Manufacturing Company mills, stood before the judge in Police Court in Newburyport accused of participating in a riot at the company's gate on Market Square in Amesbury-Salisbury Village.

The chain of events that put Swan before the bench began on June 1, when the new Agent, John Derby, who ran the mills, had changed the working conditions. Most troublesome for the mill workers who operated the machinery was the elimination of the morning and afternoon breaks during their 15-hour workday, referred to as "the lunch privilege." When about 100 of the male operatives took their usual (but eliminated) break, they were fired on the spot. On June 3, after two days of more dismissals and unrest, a noisy crowd formed in Market Square, and Swan was there. The details that came out in court give us an "evening news" glimpse of the beginnings of the labor unrest that would spread in the U.S. over the next half century.

Albert F. Bradbury, a clerk who worked in the Counting Room beside the gate, brought the complaint against Swan describing how at 10:00 AM on June 3 about 200 people were gathered outside the gate next to the Counting Room. The gates were open and some of the crowd moved into the mill yard. Because the men in the mills operated the spinning machines and the women operated the looms, the women, who never had the luncheon privilege, could continue working for some period of time. Some female operatives were in the yard, and Bradbury noted that Swan was in the yard calling out to them, "Come ladies—come out—we want you to come out." At some point, John Trussel and other mill employees closed the big gate with mild push back from those being excluded. The big gate could not be opened from the outside, but a smaller gate (see the 1849 map) could be, and was later opened and some people slipped back into the yard for a short time.



Today's Gateway Arch, the entrance to Amesbury's Upper Millyard and the site of the 1852 Derby Strike riot. At the time of the riot, only the counting house on the left stood. The arch and right-hand building were built later. (The building on the right replaced a stable in that location.)



Detail of 1849 Salisbury Manufacturing Co. map. Circle marks the gates and the Counting Room. Factory No. 2 is now Amesbury Industrial Supply and the Industrial History Center.

There are various descriptions of the noise and hubbub in the street. Bradbury said, “I heard no threatening speeches made. But the conduct was such as to alarm and terrify.” Nathaniel Horton, an employee on his way from the Counting Room to the mill to tell the female operatives they could leave, talked about how the noise was enough to interrupt people in the vicinity. He also testified, as others had, that Swan was talking to female operatives. “He had a roll of papers in his hand, and said come girls, come out.” Trussel’s observation was, “the crowd appeared to be a little noisy laughing and talking.” Trussel also noted that the banner that was displayed outside the gate, “COME WITH US AND WE WILL DO THE[E] GOOD,” is actually a temperance banner that he had “sailed under” himself. Another witness, Bailey Brown, watching from his place of business, noted that, “the clapping and shouting appeared to be mostly by boys and young lads.”

After Horton delivered his message to the supervisors in the mill at around 10:00 AM, the 150 female operatives in the mill that day left “scatteringly,” as Bradbury described it. In his testimony, George Turner*, who operated a store selling hats and accessories opposite the Counting Room, described the crowd as “talking, laughing, and clapping hands—all in a jovial way.” Earlier that morning Swan had come in and asked Turner if he could, when the female operatives left the mill, bring them into his store to sign a petition. Turner indicated that between 10:00 AM and 11:00 AM, 60 to 70 of them came in to sign.

* Turner would later become a Justice of the Peace and Treasurer of the Merrimac Hat Co.

It is odd that Swan was charged for participating in a riot. No one places him in the center of the activity at the gate, and the government witnesses, even Bradbury, can say only that they saw him talking to female operatives. But something Bradbury says suggests an explanation. "Permission was given the females to leave their work in order to stop the excitement." The focus of the demonstration in the street seemed to be to recruit the women to the cause, and Swan's purpose was to "organize" the workers. Once the women left the mill, the demonstration stopped. Ultimately, the management of the Salisbury Manufacturing Co. seemed as afraid of Swan's activities as they were of the actual non-riot outside the gates. The riot charge was a pretext. We have not been able to find any record that the scheduled follow-up appearance at the Court of Common Pleas in Lawrence ever actually happened.

As it turned out, the women organized themselves and met the next morning, and after deliberations over the next two days, the overwhelming majority of them resigned in support of the men against the arbitrary action of the Agent. Ultimately the strike failed, but within five years, so would the company. (In 2021, the Amesbury Carriage Museum published [an article on the activities of the female operatives during the Derby Strike](#), and we plan to publish a more detailed history of the strike and its place in history.)

As for Austin Swan, he was not an Amesbury/Salisbury native. He was born in New York and at 16 he was working for a farmer in Sunderland, MA. After the Derby Strike, he left the Mill Villages and worked as a carpenter in central Massachusetts. He married, fought in the Civil War for a year, and moved to Detroit, Michigan. In 1880, he moved to Fresno, California, where he died in 1918 at 83. There is no evidence of his engaging in further union activity.

Reference

"Legal Proceedings or Factory Tyranny in a New Phase." *Villager*, 1 July 1852, pp. 2-3.