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Florence
Its Past, Present, and Future

Doubtless the Florence over the seas is worthy all that has been written, said and sung in its praise; but we have up in Hampshire county one of its namesakes, whose rise and progress, if it is not so widely known, is full of local and practical interest. The Florence Sewing Machine, which has come into popular use and favor within the past tow years, has carried the fame of the village where they are manufactured, the world over, and of the daguerreotype cases, and the skeins and spools of silk that used to lie on every lady's work-table, a large part of were the production of this enterprising village. Florence lies about two miles west of Northampton, of which town it forms a part, upon the banks of one our numerous "Mill Rivers," which rises away up among the Hampshire hills, and does industrial duty at Williamsburg, Holdenville, Leeds, and Florence, on its way to the Connecticut, which it joins a short distance below Northampton.

The history of Florence, is like that of the European war, brief but interesting. A map of the place in 1831, gives a total of a school house and three dwelling houses, in the whole territory now covered by the village, and the only germ of the future manufacturing interests of the town, is a dilapidated linseed oil mill, standing near the location of the new mill of the Florence manufacturing company, now in process of erection. The whole that has been accomplished, thus dates back but little more than a generation, while the greater, and by far the most rapid portion of the development and increase has been effected within the last fifteen years. The present village of Florence originated in the "Northampton association of education and industry," which established itself in the place, in August 1841. This society was an attempt to realize some of the social reform theories, which were more in vogue then than now, and its founders pitched upon this place for their experiment. The community was based upon the ideas advocated by Fourier and kindred philosophers, and the result of the attempt is interesting in deciding some disputed questions, as the enterprise was commenced in entire honesty and sincerity, by all its members, and carried on under the most favorable auspices. About 400 acres of land, with several excellent mill privileges, were purchased for the use of the colony, and the title to the estate was vested in a body of trustees. The society had a capital stock of \$100,000, of which \$30,000 was paid in by April 1, 1842, and numbered about 140 members, among whom were several names which were then or have been since of considerable prominence in various reform and progressive movements. Most of them came from Connecticut and Rhode Island, and out of the original community only a few of the members at present remain.

S. L. Hill, to whose business ability and public munificence Florence owes much of its present growth and success, George W. Benson, Dr. E. D. Hudson, Capt. Joseph Conant, the president, and Dr. William Adams [Adam], the secretary of the association, were among the prominent men in the early days of the settlement. Calvin Stebbins of Wilbraham, an uncle of Rev. Horatio Stebbins of California, also resided among them for

some time. The first year the community suffered some loss in numbers from the results of a free and untrammled expression of opinion on all topics by all of its members, though after the incongruous elements were sloughed off, for the remainder of the time the people were harmonious and united. The plan of living in a unitary house, and of eating at a common table was tried for some time by about 75 of the members, but afterwards abandoned in favor of separate dwellings. The organization at no time interfered with the family relations, but rigorously maintained it in all its force as a sacredness. The society devoted itself mainly to agricultural labor, as being conducive to a simpler and hence purer mode of life, and also commenced on a small scale the growth and manufacture of silk. But the experiment languished for lack of funds, and in two or three years from its founding an appeal was issued "to the friends of reform and progress in the United States," soliciting contributions in its aid. An accompanying statement of their financial condition at that time, shows that the existing liabilities amounted to nearly \$25,000, and the value of the real and personal estate was \$42,000. The desired help did not come, and after an existence of a little more than five years, the organization was disbanded, and many of the members left the place. The property was entrusted to the care of S. L. Hill, who closed up the accounts and paid the debt, and divided with the members their proportion of the proceeds. Some of the people remained and are living there still and cherish the pleasantest recollections of the "old community days."

The difficulty in the way of success lay in the practice, not in the theory. In the common stock, private individuals could not accumulate property, as they wished, and when this fact became evident by experience, it was an easy and natural path for the members to seek release from their confederation. Mr. Hill, after nearly twenty years have elapsed, writes of his experience in the society as follows:

"It was instituted and sustained by pure motives and principles, and its effect upon most if not all within the circle of its influence was eminently good and salutary. From it have grown several business enterprises of some importance, one religious society located here, and we have reason to believe one or more others located elsewhere. Its influence is being perpetuated and felt in many directions, modifying personal and social habits, of old theology and politics."

After the disruption of the society, the business of manufacturing silk was carried on by Mr. Hill, who with a few associates, laid the foundation of the present Nonotuck Silk Company. The raising of the article was for the most part given up, and the supply of the raw material purchased in the foreign markets. The company as now organized, represents a capital of \$75,000, with S. L. Hinckley of Boston, S. L. Hill, A. T. Lilly, Ira and Lucius Dimock, and A.[E.] Eaton as stockholders. They own in addition to their factory at Florence, two water privileges at Leeds, on one of which they have a mill in which they carry on a branch of their business. Their present production is from 500 to 700 pounds per week, of sewing silk and twist, which finds a market principally in New York. The company purchase their stock mostly in European markets, though some of it is shipped to them direct from the silk merchants of Canton, and other cities in China and Japan. The operatives of the company are mostly women and children and they have shown a most praiseworthy interest in their comfort and welfare by building last summer a model boarding house. It provides an excellent table and light, well warmed and

ventilated rooms, where, after a day's work in the mill, tired girls may get thoroughly rested and comforted, and enjoy a little of that home feeling which is so rare in manufacturing.

But the most prominent manufacturing interest at present at Florence, is that of the Florence Sewing Machine Company, though it has not, as is often supposed given its name to the place of its production. Indeed, the christening was on the other side and this was the way of it: What is now Florence was first known as Bensonville, for several years after the community had broken up, taking its name from one of the original members who still remained. Mr. Benson lost his popularity and his position as agent to a manufacturing company at about the same time, and when Dr. Charles Munde proposed that the hamlet should be called Florence, the name met with a ready acceptance, and will remain unchanged and unimprovable. There was pecuniary benefit also in the change, for to the uninitiated the "Florence sewing silk" was of course a foreign production, and it found a readier and easier sale among those who must have foreign stamp if they get the home made reality.

The Florence sewing machine in its early stages was on exhibition at the crystal palace at New York, in 1856, where it came under the notice of S. L. Hill, who, in conferences with the inventor L. W. Langdon of Rochester, became convinced that the right idea had been hit upon, and it could be wrought by patience and genius into a desirable and effective machine, superior to any then in use. In 1857, Mr. D. G. Littlefield, at that time a resident of Florence, became connected with the enterprise, and devoted to a large share of his time and money, and an unlimited amount of faith and perseverance. The first two machines were produced in 1860, which were a decided triumph for the inventors, and the first lot of 50 were commenced soon after. The operations were at that time carried on in a small two-story brick building, which had in former days been used in the manufacture of silk, but at that time was a machine shop, and saw and shingle manufactory. This shop is now completely surrounded and almost lost in the recent and extensive works of the company. In 1860 a stock company was formed, and \$125,000 of capital placed at the disposal of the men having the enterprise in charge, which has since been increased till it now amounts to \$500,000. The shops now comprise two large three-story brick buildings, each 150 by 50 feet, one of which was built in 1864, and the other is just ready for its machinery, and was dedicated by a ball given by the operatives on Wednesday, August 15.

The foundry, store-houses and all the surroundings are mostly new and built with an equal regard to convenience and neatness of arrangement. About 250 operatives are now employed, and the production is from 1,000 to 1,200 machines per month, which will be increased in a short time to 2,000. Two of Hawley's Providence engines furnish the motive power, and heat the buildings through-out. Every machine is carefully tested before it leaves the manufactory, and no inferior or damaged work is allowed to go out. From their small beginning and in a time of civil war, and also in closely contested rivalry with competing machines, the Florence has won for itself a place in the public patronage and confidence that brings high credit to the men who persistently clung to their invention, till they had made it a success. Agencies have been established in all the principal cities the world over, and until quite recently the orders have been largely in excess of the production. Four of their finest machines for workmanship and finish will represent the company at the Paris exposition. Of 1867. Besides their new factory, now

nearly completed, the company are building several tenement blocks for their operatives, which will be finished during the summer. Each tenement is 21 by 30 feet and contains four rooms, with a full equipment of closets, pantries, and all the house-keeping conveniences. The three blocks now building will contain 18 of these tenements, each of which will afford a cosy and comfortable home for a family.

Mr. Littlefield, who was identified with the early progress of the machine, is now engaged at Pawtucket, R. I., in the only hair cloth manufactory in the country, and Mr. Langdon is absent on a European tour. Mr. Langdon has recently developed several new inventions, the last of which is steam buggy for common roads. He has succeeded in accomplishing what no other inventors have done, the applying of power to each of the four wheels, and if some man of the requisite patience and capital should elaborate the idea, it is quite likely it will reach a successful result.

Another of these Florentine discoveries was that of A. P. Critchlow, formerly a button manufacturer of Haydenville, and who transferred his business of turning wood buttons from that place to Florence. While here he invented the composition which came into rapid and general use for buttons, daguerreotype cases, &c. the principal ingredients are gum shellac and woody fibre, which with an admixture of other requisites form the desired compound. It was never patented, and the secret has in some way leaked out, and the article is now produced in several places, elsewhere. During the last winter a new company under the name of the "Florence manufacturing company," was organized, to prosecute a new application of the invention to the manufacture of brushes. They are now building a large factory a short distance above the Nonotuck silk company's works, which they expect to occupy by the first of November. The company start with a capital stock of \$200,000, most of which is owned in the place, though some of the Lansingburg, N. Y., brush manufacturers have taken interest in the new enterprise. The brush to be manufactured is the invention of A. P. Estabrook of Florence, and its principal novelty consists in the use of the plastic composition instead of wood for the back, which afterwards hardens with sufficient adhesiveness to produce a very superior article. The company are now progressing very successfully with a series of experiments and improvements in the building of the Nonotuck silk company, and will doubtless find a profitable trade open to them on commencing their manufacture.

Of the remaining prominent productive manufacturing enterprise, the Greenville cotton manufacturing company, it is sufficient to say, that it originated in the union of some of the early communists, with George W. Benson for agent, and since his unfortunate conduct of its affairs and his dismissal from office in 1848, it has steadily increased in profit and importance till the present time. In this resume of the manufacturing growth of Florence, one fact is essentially prominent, and that is that no enterprise has been started here which has not been made a permanent and profitable success, a result as creditable as it is satisfactory to the gentlemen engaged in the work.

A fire which took place in October, 1865, deprived Florence of one of its most pleasing attractions, and which in its palmy days used to draw large numbers of strangers to its healing water. The water cure of Dr. Charles Munde was commenced in the days of the association by Dr. Edward Ruggles, a colored physician, added largely to its patronage, and during the summer months his house was always filled with patients and boarders. Since the loss of his property, Dr. Munde has returned with this family to Germany, his native country, and will probably return three years when, if he carries out

his plans at leaving, he will return and rebuild his establishment on a more extensive scale.

The religious and educational interest of Florence have also been generously and closely attended to during her industrial development. The Free Congregational society, a direct lineal descendent of the original community, was organized in 1863, and holds regular Sabbath services in the hall of the new school house, the right to this use having been reserved by Mr. Hill in his gift of the building. Their platform is open to the speakers of all creeds and denominations, and all that is spoken sincerely is candidly heard. Quite a number of prominent men, whose views and positions are in sympathy with those of the people here, such as Emerson and Garrison and Phillips have held Sunday services here. A church conducted on this basis is an anomaly in our country, the only one of the kind now in existence being at Lynn, which is, like this, a product of the experiment at Florence twenty years since. They have no settled past of and do not propose to obtain one.

The orthodox Congregation society, of which Rev. Horace C. Hovey, formerly of Coldwater, Mich., is pastor, is prosperous in a steady and vigorous growth. Its new church was enlarged in 1864 by one-third of its former capacity, and an elegant and convenient lecture room built. The church, which has more than doubled its relationship, is mainly composed of the later comers to the place while most of the old residents still continue their relations with the Free Congregational society. A public library, formerly the property of the latter society, and whose circulation was limited to its members, has lately been made free to all the people of the village under proper regulations, and is gaining daily increasing popularity. From \$700 to \$1000 are annually raised by subscription and expended in the purchase of books of a wide range of educational and literary subjects.

The parent town of Northampton has always been niggardly in her appropriation of money for the schools and school-houses of her ambitious child, and it was not till 1863, that they secured the paltry allowance of \$2000 with which to erect a long needed school-house. To this pittance Mr. S. L. Hill added over \$33,000, and built one of the finest school-houses in the state, which crowns the eminence that divides the upper and lower parts of the village. By this act of wise and kindly munificence Mr. Hill has made for himself a perpetual monument in the village, which has grown up as it were under his fostering care, and his endowments, though bestowed at home, will place his name in the same list with those who seek more prominent objects for their benefactions. The building furnishes ample accommodations for the school-rooms and the public hall in the second story supplies a want of every village.

A division of Florence from Northampton, and its organization into a separate town, with Leeds and the neighboring villages is likely to be consummated at no distant day. The matter was agitated last spring, and will continue to be until the fact is accomplished. Florence is strong, able and willing enough to support herself, and her people are almost unanimous in favor of the division. They have no generous nor kindly for which to thank Northampton, and they think that while they owe her nothing, they could do better alone. The extension of the horse and steam railroads to Florence and beyond, the former of which will be running in a few weeks, and the latter in a little over a year, will give a new impulse to the growth and development of the place, and if the

progress of the next generation is in proportion to that of the last, Northampton will have to look to it, or it will be outdone by its child and rival.