

The Masters and the Powder Mill, part one

Earlier, I discussed the early textile industries on the Hoosic River at the village of Schaghticoke. They used the tremendous water power of the falls at that spot. One of the early mills in the town had nothing to do with textiles and was located on a different body of water: the black powder mill begun in 1812 on the Tomhannock Creek, just west of where it is crossed by Route 40. The mill was begun by members of the Masters family to provide black powder for the U.S. Army during the War of 1812. In the next six columns, I will outline what I have learned about the beginnings of a very famous local industry, the powder mill, and about two members of the Masters family: James and Josiah.

The first Masters to come to Schaghticoke was James (1731-1820). Like Bethel Mather, whom I wrote about recently, James was one of the many New Englanders who moved west and north following the American Revolution, looking both for better farmland and for industrial opportunities. He and wife Eunice (1738-1795) and their five children arrived from near Fairfield, Connecticut in 1783. I think it took ambition and initiative for a middle-aged man and wife and a large family to pick up and move with the Revolution barely over and the new country not really established. Plus, James was not a poor man seeking his fortune. He was able to purchase a tract of land two miles square on the north bank of the Hoosic River, at the junction of current Masters Street and Ridge Road. He built his first home in six weeks, later adding a "mansion", plus grist, saw, and woolen mills, a school house, and a family cemetery. Most of the estate, known as St. Croix Farm, stayed in the Masters family until at least 1880. James immediately became involved in local government, serving as one of the two Overseers of the Poor in the brand new town of Schaghticoke in 1789.

James' youngest son, Josiah (1764-1822) came to Schaghticoke a bit after the rest of the family. He arrived in 1784, after his graduation from Yale. There would have been very few college-educated people in Schaghticoke at that time. Josiah married three times. His first wife Eunice died in 1789, days following the death of their newborn son. They were the first burials in the Masters family cemetery. Josiah and second wife Lucy Hull had seven children. She died in 1816. Josiah then married Ann Smith, by whom he had two more children.

Upon arrival in Schaghticoke, Josiah immediately entered politics as a Democratic-Republican, the party of Thomas Jefferson. The Governor appointed him Justice of the Peace for the town in 1791 and Associate Justice of the county in 1793. He was elected to the New York State Legislature in 1792, 1800, and 1801. In between, in 1796 and 1798, he was supervisor of the town of Schaghticoke. From 1801-1805 he was Justice of the Peace in Rensselaer County again. He achieved election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1805, and was re-elected in 1807. In Washington, Masters made many important friends. Finished with national politics, he was appointed First Judge of Rensselaer County in 1808, and served there until his death in 1822. He was thereafter known as "Judge Masters."

Nicholas (1759-1838) and James (1761-1828) were James' other sons. Both also became involved in the community. Nicholas and Josiah both served as early school commissioners. All were involved in the organization of the first Masonic Lodge, the Homer Lodge, organized in 1799. Josiah was the first Master. James and Josiah were two of the initial subscribers to the Presbyterian Church in 1803. Josiah and Nicholas both bought pews when the church was moved in 1820, and Nicholas was an early elder of the church.

In the next column, I will discuss the founding of the Powder Mill.

The Masters and the Powder Mill, part two

In the last column, I described the arrival in Schaghticoke of the Masters family from Connecticut. Patriarch James purchased two square miles of land on what is now Masters Street. His son Josiah plunged into politics and served as a US Congressman from Rensselaer County from 1805 to 1809. He made many great political contacts in Washington.

When the War of 1812 with Great Britain began, New York State, with its border with Canada, was one of the most exposed states. Much of the fighting in the war occurred on the borders of New York and Canada. The Governor of the State was Daniel D. Tompkins, like Josiah Masters a Democratic-Republican. Tompkins was a very active war governor, spending much of his own fortune to finance war preparations- and then finding that New York was not good at repaying its debts (what a surprise!). He died destitute in 1825.

In 1812, Josiah, probably along with his brothers James and Nicholas, built a mill on the Tomhannock Creek, west of where it crosses Route 40, to produce gun powder to supply the U.S. Army. There are several theories as to why they were authorized to build the mill. According to Anderson in Landmarks of Rensselaer County, President Madison and Governor Tompkins separately and together used their personal influences with the Masters to secure the establishment of the mills. Kloppott, in her History of Schaghticoke, turned it around, stating that Madison and James Monroe prevailed upon the Governor to name the Masters to build the mill. Masters would have met them while a Congressman in Washington, D.C. It seems to me that whatever the reality, political influence was used. And it makes more sense to me to think that the Masters wanted to build the mill and used political “pull” to get permission. But political influence didn’t result in a boondoggle. The Tomhannock was a site well-situated for water transportation of the product on the Hudson River. It was close to the new Watervliet Arsenal, but rather isolated in case of explosions, and there was no other source of munitions supply between New York City and the Canadian border. So far I have not found any early record of the powder manufactured there. The powder mill remained in the Masters family until 1836.

The community of Schaghticoke Hill grew up around the mill. There was a keg factory, a grist mill, a saw and turning mill, all using the power of the Tomhannock. There was also a store, and a blacksmith shop, a school house, and a Methodist church. Herman Knickerbocker, whom I will write about in future columns, had a textile factory and a home on the Tomhannock as well.

The mill moved to the Hoosic River in Valley Falls in the second half of the 19th century, and became part of Dupont Powder. Many local residents know the story of its periodic explosions, and the final explosion in 1928, resulting in the death of four workers and the closure of the mill. In later columns, I will tell its story more fully. In the next column, I will continue the history of the Masters family.

The Masters and the Powder Mill, part three

In the last few columns, I discussed the arrival in Schaghticoke of the Masters family of Connecticut. Son Josiah rose quickly in politics to become a US Congressman, and then used his political influence to get the business of the US Army for the gun powder he and his brothers began to manufacture in a mill on the Tomhannock Creek in 1812. The mill was an important local business for over one hundred years.

The Masters were also farmers, Josiah the Congressman on a grand scale. Josiah died at age 58 in 1822, while visiting his home town of Fairfield, Connecticut. Perhaps due to his unexpected death, and due to its size, his estate was not finally settled until 1834. He left a will, but the papers connected with settling the estate occupy two fat folders in the probate records. Earlier, I stated that father James acquired a plot two miles square when he came to town in 1783. A map in the probate file shows four contiguous farms along what is now Masters Street. Josiah had just sold a farm of 125 acres his father left him in 1820 to John D. Dickinson. Next door was the "Manchester Farm," about the same size, which had already been sold, as well as Josiah's own "Grass Farm," about 100 acres, and the farm of his brother James, about 60 acres. Josiah also had a large farm in Stillwater. When father James died in 1820, at age 89, he owned a modest amount of livestock: one yoke of old oxen, one bay mare, eleven sheep, and seven cows. Presumably he would have been mostly retired from farming. But Josiah, dying in the prime of his career, left 325 sheep, four yoke of oxen, 30 cows, 40 hogs, and ten hives of bees. Prominent local attorney- and fellow former Congressman- Herman Knickerbocker was executor of the estate, along with the widow. The inventory of his estate, made by Bethel Mather and Munson Smith, a brother-in-law, was literally ten feet long. The estate sale took two days. It seems that everything was sold, and that Josiah's widow Ann and her children had to buy what they wanted of the family belongings.

The Masters lived in high style. The fact that the house James built once he had established himself in town was called "The Mansion" tells us that. Morgan Lewis, who was Governor of NY just before the War of 1812 and Quartermaster General during the war, wrote to his wife from Troy in February, 1815. He described a "grand entertainment at Judge Masters' ...for the Officers of the Army. It consisted of 60 gentlemen and ladies who dined with him and were entertained with a ball in the evening, all in handsome style. A great part of the company stayed to breakfast the next morning, and I have seldom been at a pleasanter party. The women were generally very handsome and dressed as well as the ladies of any of our cities." Would you be able to entertain sixty people at a dance at your home, accommodate most of them for the night, and feed them breakfast the next morning? Not to mention that they would have arrived in horse drawn vehicles, so that the horses would have had to be tended to. And this was in February, at a period when the roads in the area would have been very primitive. The Masters must have had formidable resources. I would have liked to have been there!

The Masters and the Powder Mill, part four

In previous columns, I've discussed the Masters family, immigrants to Schaghticoke just after the Revolution from Connecticut. Father James, who died in 1820, and son Josiah, who died in 1822, both left extensive records of their estates in the probate records of Rensselaer County, allowing us a glimpse of their lives.

After their deaths, inventories were made of the estates of both father James and son Josiah. James, who died in 1820 at the age of 89, was very much an 18th century man. His inventory includes basic furniture, dishes, and cooking utensils. The most valuable items were a looking glass worth \$6.50, 12 linen and cotton sheets, valued at \$15, and a feather bed, worth \$12. He owned a watch worth \$6.50 and his wearing apparel was valued at \$46. Interestingly, James' sons Nicholas and Josiah each owed him over \$2,000 when he died. Perhaps this was a way for him to distribute some of their inheritance before his death.

Josiah had many more belongings, including many yards of carpeting, a 26-volume set of an encyclopedia plus about 25 other books, a "blue dining set" of dishes worth \$30, a gold watch worth \$35, five silver teaspoons, four maps, a coach worth \$27, and "an electrical machine" worth \$2. Who knows what that was? His apparel was only valued at \$30. The inventory even included the contents of his pocket when he died: \$5.25 and a New York City lottery ticket, which won \$10. It also included powder mill supplies and products, and the statement of the open accounts there. Sixty-five men owed from less than a dollar to about \$150 to the mill. This would indicate that Josiah owned the mill.

Josiah's probate records include details of the expenses of his widow Ann between the date of his death and the final settlement of the estate in 1835. Ann was Josiah's third wife. They had been married after the death of second wife Lucy in 1816. Ann and her young two children by Josiah, Justus, and Ann Margaret went to live in Hamilton, N.Y., her home town, after Josiah died. She had a very cordial correspondence with her brother-in-law, Nicholas, as they worked to settle Josiah's estate and take care of his other children. He reported on doings in his family, for example, reporting that his grandsons John and Edward were in school in Bennington in 1834. He also asked in 1831, "we are anxious to learn whether Justus has yet regained the use of his limbs." We don't know the answer to that, but Justus survived at least until the settlement of the estate in 1835.

Josiah's eldest daughter Eunice was married to Charles Stebbins and lived in Cazenovia. Eldest son Samuel, born in 1801, was advanced \$40 when he left home for Boston after his father's death. He received another \$50 in 1823. I will devote later columns to Samuel, who became the first US Counsel to the island of Guam. Josiah had four teenage children, all in boarding school. Between 1822 and 1825, son Augustus received \$500 for his support. The accounts record constant payment for room and board for daughters, Eliza, Louisa, and Ianthe, as well as their doctor bills, and fees for clothing purchased for them. Josiah's brother Nicholas managed their accounts for his sister-in-law, Ann, who paid about \$100 per year for the support of Ianthe, and \$200 each for the other girls.

In the next column, I will finish the story of Josiah and his life and death and provide a bibliography for the whole series.

The Masters and the Powder Mill, part five

In four previous columns, I have told the story of two members of a prominent Schaghticoke family of the 19th century, the Masters. Josiah, who served in the US Congress from 1805-1809, founded the Schaghticoke Powder Company, and served as the First Judge of Rensselaer County until his unexpected death in 1822, while visiting his home town of Fairfield, Connecticut. There is a large probate file detailing his estate in the Rensselaer County Historical Society. Brother Nicholas and Josiah's third wife, Ann, worked to settle the estate and take care of Josiah's five children by his second wife.

The probate file also yields the detail that James Mallory of Schaghticoke went to Fairfield to retrieve Josiah's corpse in 1822, at a cost of \$30; that the funeral expenses in Connecticut were \$150; that it cost Ann, her children, and her servant \$25 to get home from Connecticut; and that the grave monument, not purchased until 1832, cost \$25. Josiah was buried in the family plot, next to the Mansion House on Masters Street.

Most of the other documents in the Josiah's probate file involve the business of his farms on Masters Street and in Stillwater, including bills for cutting and hauling logs, harvesting crops, building stone and wood fences, and blacksmithing. There are receipts for crops sold: buckwheat, rye, corn, hay, oats, butter, and wool, and for rents collected on houses, including the Mansion House itself, rented first to Henry Burch, then to Dr. Newcomb. Other receipts were for subscriptions to the local newspaper and an agricultural magazine called "The Ploughboy." Finally, there is a note of the sale of the farm in Stillwater. Many of these transactions and others were handled by Herman Knickerbacker, fellow former-US Congressman and prominent local attorney, as executor. In the end, he wasn't happy with the Surrogate's settlement of the estate, though from the available documents, I can't tell why. He submitted detailed bills for his travel around the area, usually \$4 per trip for the rental of a horse and wagon, plus bills for his actual work as executor.

The Masters family story illustrates the prosperity of the country following the American Revolution. Father James was a wealthy New Englander when he moved his large family to New York, seeking more land. He plunged into the local community. His ambitious and educated son Josiah entered politics, performing for a while on the national stage. He used his political connections to boost his Powder Mill, founded to help in the first war fought by the new Republic. Josiah also had extensive farms, and kept up with the latest in agricultural improvements. His political connections probably helped his son Samuel in his diplomatic career. Judge Masters died a wealthy man, having lived a cosmopolitan life, controlling business and farms, while prominent in county politics.

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