

Johnston Historical Society

Historical Notes

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www.JohnstonHistorical.org

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Morgan Mills

by Louis McGowan

Today, the little village of Morgan Mills is hardly distinguishable from the rest of the modern buildup on Morgan Avenue. For much of the nineteenth century and for the first few decades of the twentieth century, though, Morgan Mills was a separate, small textile village that hummed with activity. The focal point of the community was the rubble-stone mill building that local people worked in for over 150 years.



Built about 1817 by Christopher Harris and Christopher Atwood, the textile mill in Morgan Mills lasted until the 1970s when it burned to the ground. The trapdoor monitor, an early feature, provided light for the upper story. Located just to the south of Morgan Avenue, it used the Pocasset River for power. Samson Almy ran the mill in the 1820s, followed by a Matthewson, William Larcher, the Spragues, the Pierces, and Leander W. Peckham in 1896.

Photo courtesy of Rich LaFazia

Around 1800, the Atwood family owned the land where the mill was located. Nemiah Atwood sold to Elnathan Atwood in 1800 a tract of land, part of which included the site of the mill. This property was conveyed to Christopher Harris and Christopher A. Atwood in 1815 and in 1819. Town tax records from 1818 and 1819 show that Harris and Atwood paid taxes on a factory which is presumed to be the Morgan Mill. Since their mill was not mentioned in the 1815 deed and they paid taxes on a factory in

1818, it is thought that they built the Morgan Mill during that time period. While the tax records do not mention the name of their mill, we are assuming that this is in fact the mill that is being looked at here. I have seen no other mills connected with their name, so it is a reasonable assumption.

Harris and Atwood sold the property, with the stone mill now referenced, to William and Samson Almy on April 18, 1822. A 1917 *Providence Journal* newspaper article states that old-timers in the area called the mill "Almy's" mill, while others called the mill "Amey's." I grew up in Thornton in the 1950s and we called the pond on the Allendale property -- "Sansoney's" or something approximately like that. We said it as all one word and substituted an "n" for the "m" in Samson. Of course, we had no idea where the name came from and wouldn't have cared either. Only as an adult did I find out that the pond where we used to skate was named after Samson Almy, local mill owner.

In Jackson's 1840 *Geology of Rhode Island*, we see that the Almy family still owned the property as Almy's Factory is the name given to Morgan Mills. On October 5, 1843, the mill passed out of the Almy family when Joseph Almy sold the mill and property to Thomas Abbott and Zenas Bliss. On that same day, Abbott & Bliss secured a mortgage from Almy for \$5,400. On May 25, 1846, Almy transferred the remaining notes to Earl P. Mason. Mason was partner with John H. Mason in the firm of John H. Mason & Company. They held mortgages for many industrial properties around Rhode Island, and Abbott & Bliss took out a number of mortgages with them for this property.

The exact chain of events for this property in this 1840s time period is difficult to follow, and there is some disagreement among the sources as to the sequence of events. It appears that Abbott & Bliss had some financial difficulty in operating the mill,

hence maybe, the many mortgages. The mills, called the Clay Print Works by this time, were conveyed to William and John Larcher, who seemed to have run the mills for a time in the 1850s (and possibly earlier). The Larchers received the mills from Earl P. Mason, who in turn received them from Abbott & Bliss. The latter evidently defaulted on one of their mortgages with Mason. On the property in the 1840s were: the print works, a bleach house, a color house, a dye house, and dwelling houses.

On February 29, 1864, the mills and property were sold by William Larcher and Lucy Larcher, widow of John Larcher, both of Providence, to Amasa Sprague of Cranston and William Sprague of Providence. The Spragues, sons of Amasa Sprague who was brutally murdered in 1843, ran the powerful A&W Sprague Company. William was at various times a U.S. Senator, a governor of Rhode Island, and a general during the Civil War. At Morgan Mills, the Spragues changed over the machinery so the factory could convert the cotton waste from their other manufacturing sites into twine, batting, and carpet material. One source tells us that Morgan Mills was named after a member of the Sprague family, but we have found no other source corroborating this. The National Panic of 1873 crippled their financial empire, and Morgan Mills stood idle while waiting for litigation settlements against the Spragues. For example, Horatio N. Waterman of East Greenwich in 1882 and Evan Randolph of Pennsylvania executed Writs of Attachment against the Morgan Mills property as part of their fight to win a settlement against A&W Sprague. The whole estate was sold at auction on June 23, 1883, probably to the Pierce brothers. Backing up that claim, James E. Pierce and Seth A. Pierce, co-partners in J.E. Pierce & Co., on March 24, 1884, took out a mortgage on the property with the Union Company. J.E. Pierce & Co. ran the mills from 1884 to 1896, manufacturing shoddy and waste products.

In 1896, Leander W. Peckham purchased the property under the name of Leander W. Peckham & Co. from Frederick S. Peck of Providence. Peck received the property at auction from the mortgagee of J.E. Pierce & Co. Peckham's business was the treatment of noils and other conversions of wool waste (it was the shoddy business -- making wool cloth from reclaimed fibers). He moved here from across town in Thornton, where he had engaged in the same business at the Bag Mill in Frog City. During the twenty years that Peckham ran the mill (he died in 1917), the mill was said to have "experienced the greatest season of prosperity in its

long and varying career, now seeming for the first time to have found its right place in the manufacturing family of the State." Peckham made many improvements at the mills, putting in new floors, installing a new and larger engine and boiler, and re-shingling and repainting the buildings. By 1910, Charles H. Peckham was listed as the superintendent and Leander was listed as the proprietor. From the State Factory Inspection Reports, we see that the company employed between thirty-five and forty-five workers in the early years of the twentieth century and between twelve and forty from 1915 to 1926. After Leander died in 1917, the Carroll Brothers Co. owned and operated the mills, but they retained the name of Leander W. Peckham & Co.



Morgan Mills, shown in this 1870 map, depended on neighboring villages for schools and churches. With the loss of its mill and with the development of new housing plats, it has lost much of its village identity. Morgan Avenue runs through the center of the village.

In those days, a small building was used for Sunday School purposes, but the residents of Morgan Mills had to walk to Dry Brook (present-day Hughesdale) to attend church services. There was a small store in the village run by Joseph Webb, but for more serious shopping in the early days the villagers walked to Plainfield Pike and then took the stagecoach which ran down the pike into Olneyville (which was described by Ida Pierce in 1917 as "a bustling trade center").

The mill closed in 1933 and it remained idle until 1940 when Thomas Volatile bought the property. The buildings were in shambles. No windows remained and the roof sagged. Volatile repaired the buildings himself. In 1946, his first tenant moved in, a knitting company that operated here for one and a half years. Peter Culati was another early tenant, running the Elastex, Inc. firm which made elastic braid using the whole upper floor of the old mill building. He employed five or six people and was still operating in 1952.

- *Rhode Island Factory Inspection Reports*, various years from 1905 to 1926.

The National Furnace Corporation moved in next, making heat treating equipment. Volatile added a ground floor addition for their use. The third firm was Tabco Braid, headed by Albert Taraborelli. His firm started out in Providence, but needed to expand and found the room at Morgan Mills. They employed ten workers.

Another business at the site was the Johnston Worsted Company, the only weave shop in Johnston in 1952. They occupied the ground floor of the old mill. They started out with two looms and by 1955 were using twenty-four looms. They employed thirty people on a three-shift schedule. The firm was operated by Thomas and John Parillo from Providence, brothers who formerly worked for the American Woolen Company.

In the time that Volatile owned the mills, he added more than 7,000 square feet to the existing 15,000 square feet on the three floors of the mill. He also built three new dwellings. A 1955 *Providence Journal* article states that Volatile had brought in sixteen businesses, employing 125 full time and twenty-five part time workers. The new businesses included numerous jewelry firms, a screw machine operator, a furniture refinisher, and a lacquer maker. He also added several small buildings.

The 1955 newspaper article says that Volatile's successes shows the worth of the industrial park idea, which was catching on strongly in Rhode Island at the time. Unfortunately, Volatile's idea evaporated in the 1970s, when most of the complex went up in smoke. This interesting site demonstrated the transition from early, small, rural textile mill, which was later run by one of the nation's textile giants (A&W Sprague), to a modern industrial park. Today, though, other than Leander Peckham's house, there is little left to show us that the old textile village ever existed.

Sources:

- *Providence Journal*, 12/16/1917, "The Transformation of Morgan Mills."
- Ibid, Oct. 19, 1952, "Reclaimed Morgan Mills Property Now Houses Eight Small Plants with Jobs for 70 Workers."
- Ibid, Sep. 18, 1955, "Project Houses 16 New Firms."
- Johnston Tax Lists, 1818 and 1819.
- *Johnston Book of Deeds*, Book 12, p102 and p164; Book 20, p445; Book 60, p39.
- *Johnston Directories*, 1890, 1892, 1896, 1898, 1910, 1913, 1916. 1922, 1924, 1926.
- *Attachments, Executions & Mechanics Liens #2 (Town of Johnston)*, p83, 110-116
- *Annual Report of Commissioner of Industrial Statistics (R.I.)*, (1902).
- *Blue Book Textile Directories*, 1894, 1895, 1896, 1897.
- *Providence Journal of Commerce*, Aug. and Dec., 1896.

Historic New England offers a helping hand for historic homeowners

How do you know what's best for your old house? Could you use some help deciding how to preserve and maintain the historic character of your home? Historic New England, the oldest, largest and most comprehensive regional preservation organization in the country, now offers a new specialty membership category for owners of historic houses, whether the house was built in 1750 or 1950.

Launched in July 2006, the Historic Homeowner membership gives homeowners individualized access to Historic New England's distinguished legacy of excellence in historic preservation, expertise the organization has developed over almost a century of caring for its historic properties. Historic Homeowner staff provides online evaluation, consultation, and referrals on a range of issues confronting older houses, from updating a kitchen to finding a more suitable paint color scheme or locating a specialty supplier for just the right fixture or detail. The Historic Homeowner staff will work with you to answer your old house questions so that you can be sure you are preserving the character and value of your historic home.

Benefits include online consultation to help select historically appropriate paint colors or to evaluate design or construction proposals for compatibility with your old house, two additional technical assistance calls annually, electronic newsletters on historic house maintenance issues, invitations to members-only workshops, and a password-protected web site just for Historic Homeowner members. Historic Homeowner members also enjoy all the benefits of Household membership in Historic New England, including admission for two to all 36 Historic New England museum properties, member discounts, and the award-winning Historic New England magazine.

To join, call (617) 227-3957, x273, or join online at www.HistoricHomeowner.org.

Historic New England is presented by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities

Society Doings

Executive Board Changes

Society President Louis McGowan announced at the January 31st general meeting that Dan Brown, our faithful treasurer for much of the past ten years, had decided to step down. We won't be getting rid of him that easily, though, as he will continue to be a member of the Executive Board as a trustee.

Taking Dan's place until new officers are installed in June is member Virginia Brunelle. Welcome Virginia!

At the same meeting Louis asked for a volunteer to take on the responsibility of keeping track of membership and dues. After the meeting member Robin Smith stepped up and agreed to take on the task. She's already entered all membership info into a spreadsheet, bringing us into the 1980s and rendering Louis' ratty old index cards obsolete. Way to go Robin!

Speakers

Louis McGowan gave a great slideshow on Providence postcards. at our January 31st general meeting. The show was made all the more interesting for his having inserted all the slides backwards!

Hobby Night was the theme of our February 28th meeting. Rolf Johnson showed us an intricate diorama he built depicting a logging train offloading logs to be floated down river to the sawmill. Michael Burch collects and restores old mantle clocks, and he brought along a few examples for us to see. If you weren't able to make the meeting, come to the JHS Tea in April (see Upcoming Events, below, for details) and see the clocks in their home setting. Christopher Martin, who runs Quahog.org, a website about Rhode Island history, played a few old kinescope films from 1900 and 1903 that were filmed in Providence, Pawtucket, and Newport. Louis McGowan revealed his 26th or 27th hobby (but who's counting), a collection of unusual Victorian era silver flatware. We were amused by the trouble to which manufacturers went to create a different utensil for every possible use, from lettuce forks to horseradish spoons. And Bel Peters went all out in her presentation on tea traditions, setting up a display with a table and chairs, tea service, finger sandwiches, cookies, and scones, and a pair of dolls dressed as if for visiting. Bel herself was dressed for the occasion, as well, in a full black dress with bonnet.

Louis took the floor again at our March 28th meeting, presenting a slideshow on Johnston history. Members whose memories of the town go back several decades enjoyed reminiscing about buildings and businesses that "used to be there," while those not so familiar with the old days picked up some interesting facts.

Christmas Open House

Last year's open house was quite successful, with many people we'd never seen before showing up to tour the Elijah Angel House and the JHS Museum.



One of those we met was Raymond Beausejour, of North Providence, who stopped by with his replica penny farthing bicycle. A few of the more adventurous among us even tried it out!

Our Properties

A couple of restoration carpenters were out at Belknap School on December 30th preparing to work up an estimate for the interior restoration. Once we get the estimate we'll put the project out to bid.

The saga of our Brown Avenue property continues. Questions arose some months ago as to whether the person who donated the property to the society really had the legal right to do so. In an attempt to clear up the confusion Louis recently finished researching the deed chain and submitted the results to the Department of Environmental Management for consideration. Nothing is ever easy!

The museum and house continue to be open by appointment, and we always welcome visits by interested individuals or groups. Just shoot us an email at info@johnstonhistorical.org, or leave a message at (401) 231-3380 to set one up.

Our museum space is also available (on a limited basis) for meetings of small groups of adults at a reasonable price. If you know of a local group or organization that is looking for a meeting space, and might be interested in using our museum, please have them contact us.

Grant Activity

You may recall that the society was awarded a grant of \$30,000 by the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission back in December. Under the terms of the grant the society is responsible for raising \$15,000 in matching funds. As

of the end of March we'd accumulated about \$8,000 from various sources, mostly other grants.

\$5,000 of that came from Rhode Island Resource Recovery, thanks to the efforts of member Mike Salvadore.

We also received an additional \$5,000 from the RIHC&HC to be used to nominate the Belknap School for the National Register of Historic Places.

Acquisitions

- Evelyn Beaumier contributed a program from the Thornton Grammar School's 1916 graduation exercises. Evelyn's mother, Ruth Crothers, was one of the students.
- Tommy Hartshorn gave us a picture of his father taken when he was in the service during World War II, and a picture of himself taken when he was a graduate of Thornton Grammar School.
- Eunice (Caparelli) Hartshorn donated a photo of Thornton Grammar School's 1942 graduating class, complete with a list on the back naming all the participants.
- On a visit to Greenville Antiques in Smithfield, Louis found a collection of nineteenth century receipts for purchases made at various stores in Providence. The items were bought by Joseph Webb of Johnston for his store in the village of Morgan Mills.

Bruno Romeri made a cover and paddle for the nineteenth century butter churn we have on display in the Elijah Angell House. He did such a good job that you'd have to be an expert to tell the difference between the old and new parts. Thanks Bruno!

Our sincere thanks to all who have donated items for our collections. Keep it coming!

Cemeteries

Johnston's Historical Cemeteries Cleanup Day takes place on April 14th this year -- see Upcoming Events, below, for details.

It's never too late to adopt one of Johnston's one-hundred or so historical cemeteries. All you need to do is pick up trash, weed whack grass and undergrowth, and cut and clear brush at least once a year. Not only will you be helping to make your town more attractive, you'll also be helping to preserve our heritage.

If you are interested, or know of someone who might be, please contact us at (401) 231-3380 or info@johnstonhistorical.org.

Website Updates

We now have a Johnston Historical Society Yahoo Groups talk list. For those of you unfamiliar with such things, this is a way for society members and other interested parties to communicate with one another online. Think of it as an electronic bulletin board, where one person can post a notice or ask a question, to which any number of others can then respond. Each talk list member can choose to receive these posts through their own email, or read them online at the Yahoo Groups website.

The Johnston Historical Society will be using this talk list as a supplement to its website and newsletter, posting notices of upcoming meetings, late breaking news, and historical tid-bits.

Please feel free to post to the list any questions you may have about Johnston history or genealogy. Even if those of us who are members of the Johnston Historical Society don't know the answer, maybe someone else on the list will. In any case, we encourage you to communicate amongst yourselves. Every Johnstonian, past and present, is a library unto him or herself. The larger this online community grows, the larger will become the combined knowledgebase of Johnston history that each of you can tap.

And please don't feel the list should be limited only to serious research. Reconnecting with old friends and reminiscing about days gone by are laudable pursuits, as well, and in the end the possible uses of the list are limited only by your imaginations.

You can find the JHS Yahoo Groups talk list online at groups.yahoo.com/group/johnstonhistorical/. Click the "Join This Group!" button and follow the instructions to become a talk list member. You can also join through the JHS website, www.JohnstonHistorical.org, by entering your email address in the box at the bottom of the About Us page.

Upcoming Events

Unless otherwise noted, all events take place at the Johnston Historical Society Museum Barn, 101 Putnam Pike, Johnston, and are free and open to the public.

April 14, 2007

Johnston Historical Cemeteries Cleanup Day

8am-12noon

Volunteers will head to local cemeteries to clean debris as part of Earth Day. A continental breakfast will be held at the Johnston War Memorial Park at 8am and, following the work day, a hot dog lunch will be served at 12:30pm. To get involved call (401) 272-3460.

April 21, 2007

Johnston Historical Society Yard Cleanup Day

9am-11am

Many hands make light work, so they say. Please lend your hands and help spruce up the yard around the Elijah Angell House and our museum barn.

April 25, 2007

General Meeting

7pm

Speaker TBA.

April 29, 2007

JHS Tea

1pm-3pm

This year's Tea event will take place at John Sweet House. Socialize, enjoy homemade finger foods and desserts, tour the house, and try your luck in the raffle/auction! Tickets are \$20 and their number is limited, so reserve your space early! Proceeds will benefit the Johnston Historical Society. For tickets please call Kit Rhodes at (401) 231-7523.

May 5, 2007

Open House at Clemence-Irons House

11am-4pm

38 George Waterman Road, Johnston. Join a representative from Historic New England for a tour of this rarely-open seventeenth-century stone-ender. Visit www.historicnewengland.org for more information. (This event is not run or sponsored by the Johnston Historical Society).

May 30, 2007

General Meeting

7pm

Following the meeting Christopher Martin will present "What the Heck is That? Part 2: Another Way of Looking at Johnston."

June 27, 2007

General Meeting

7pm

Speaker TBA.

~ Summer hiatus ~

September 26, 2007

General Meeting

7pm

Speaker TBA.

Johnston's 250th Birthday

A number of organizational meetings to plan a celebration of the 250th anniversary of our town's founding in 1759 have taken place over the last few months. Right now we're trying to decide whether it would be in our best interests to hire an event planner to oversee the celebration. This is obviously a big step with a lot of possible consequences as well as benefits, so we're taking our time and gathering as much information as possible before we make a decision.

We've begun to move out of the realm of pipe dreams and started trying to nail down the specifics of what's going to happen, when, and who's going to do it. Much more still needs to be done, and it's not too late to get involved.

Additional planning meeting dates will be posted in the Events section of JohnstonHistorical.org as they are set.

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**What the Heck is That?**

A different look at some Johnston Landmarks by Christopher Martin

Following are some close-ups of places or objects located in the Town of Johnston. Can you identify what or where they are?





3

Answers will appear in the next issue.



### Johnston, Rhode Island

from Wikipedia.org

Johnston is a town in Providence County, Rhode Island, United States. The population was 28,195 at the 2000 census. One of Rhode Island's earliest houses, a stone-ender called the Clemence Irons House (1691) is open as a museum in Johnston. Johnston was incorporated on March 6, 1759, and was named for the Honorable Augustus Johnston, colonial attorney general at the time.

#### Geography

According to the United States Census Bureau, the town has a total area of 24.4 square miles. 23.7 square miles of it is land and 0.7 square miles of it (2.91%) is water.

#### Demographics

As of the census of 2000, there were 28,195 people, 11,197 households, and 7,725 families residing in the town. The population density was 1,191.4 per square mile. There were 11,574 housing units at an average density of 489.1 per square mile. The racial makeup of the town was 96.66% White, 0.65% African American, 0.13% Native American, 1.08% Asian, 0.05% Pacific Islander, 0.55% from other races, and 0.88% from two or more races. Hispanic or Latino of any race were 1.89% of the population.

There were 11,197 households out of which 27.8% had children under the age of 18 living with them, 53.9% were married couples living together, 11.4% had a female householder with no husband present, and 31.0% were non-families. 26.6% of all households were made up of individuals and 13.2%

had someone living alone who was 65 years of age or older. The average household size was 2.47 and the average family size was 3.02.

In the town the population was spread out with 20.9% under the age of 18, 6.3% from 18 to 24, 30.0% from 25 to 44, 23.9% from 45 to 64, and 18.9% who were 65 years of age or older. The median age was 41 years. For every 100 females there were 88.2 males. For every 100 females age 18 and over, there were 84.9 males.

The median income for a household in the town was \$43,514, and the median income for a family was \$54,837. Males had a median income of \$40,210 versus \$29,314 for females. The per capita income for the town was \$21,440. About 6.8% of families and 8.3% of the population were below the poverty line, including 9.0% of those under age 18 and 13.6% of those age 65 or over.

In 2000, 46.7% of Johnston residents identified as being of Italian heritage. This was the highest percentage of Italian Americans of any municipality in the country.



### Contribute To Our Newsletter!

We are always looking for articles for our newsletter. Naturally, we would like pieces that have to do with the town's history, but if you have an interest that ties in with history somehow, why not share it with us? Maybe you collect old snuffboxes or old railroad material. Maybe you have done some of your family history that others might be interested in. Maybe you would like to talk about the old days in Johnston. Wouldn't it be fun to share your knowledge! You do not have to be a great writer to put together an article. None of us are great literary figures. If you need help though, one of us would be glad to assist you.

We think that it will make for a much better newsletter if others contribute pieces that they have written. Remember, your reminiscences about the old days in Johnston will become valuable pieces of our town's history. But if you do not get them down on paper, they will be lost forever. We should make sure that future generations know what went on in times past.

**Next newsletter deadline: July 25, 2007.**

**Our Executive Board**

President: Louis McGowan  
Vice-President: Bel Peters  
Treasurer: Virginia Brunelle  
Recording Secretary: Evelyn Beaumier  
Corresponding Secretary: Christopher Martin  
Trustee: Gregory Burr  
Trustee: John Barratini  
Trustee: Rolf Johnson  
Trustee: Dan Brown

Our Executive Board meets at 7pm in the Museum building, 101 Putnam Pike, on the second to the last Wednesday of each month, September through June (except December). All are welcome to attend.

General Meetings are held at 7pm the last Wednesday of each month, September through June (no December meeting. We hold our Holiday Party that month). The meetings are held in the Museum Building.

Our phone number is: (401) 231-3380  
Our website address is: [www.JohnstonHistorical.org](http://www.JohnstonHistorical.org)  
Our email address is: [Info@JohnstonHistorical.org](mailto:Info@JohnstonHistorical.org)

**Annual Dues**

Have you paid your 2007 dues yet? It is that time again. Your dues help us to operate. The price of a single membership is only \$15; a family membership is only \$20. Wotta bargain! So once more, please pay your 2007 dues. Send us a check today!

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Renewal    Single (\$15) \_\_\_\_\_  
                  Family (\$20) \_\_\_\_\_

New            Single (\$15) \_\_\_\_\_  
                  Family (\$20) \_\_\_\_\_

Don't forget -- your donations to the Johnston Historical Society can be deducted from your taxes. We are registered with the Federal Government as a non-profit organization.

**JOHNSTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
101 PUTNAM PIKE  
JOHNSTON, RHODE ISLAND 02919**