

## Tour of Stevens Linen Works Historic District, Dudley, Massachusetts

Last April 24th, on a sunny Saturday, about 30 to 40 SNEC members gathered for a tour of Stevens Linen Works Historic District, in Dudley, Massachusetts. Located on the border of Connecticut, south and a little west of Worcester, Dudley was an early site of textile manufacturing. Once the Slater family located in this region and built their textile empire, it became a major textile manufacturing center. Yet its history and resources are less well-known than those of the joint-stock mill cities (Lowell, Lawrence) or even the Blackstone River Valley. As SNECers who were able to visit some of the mills and mill housing sites listed on the Early Bird Tour, the area is rich in IA resources connected with textile manufacturing.



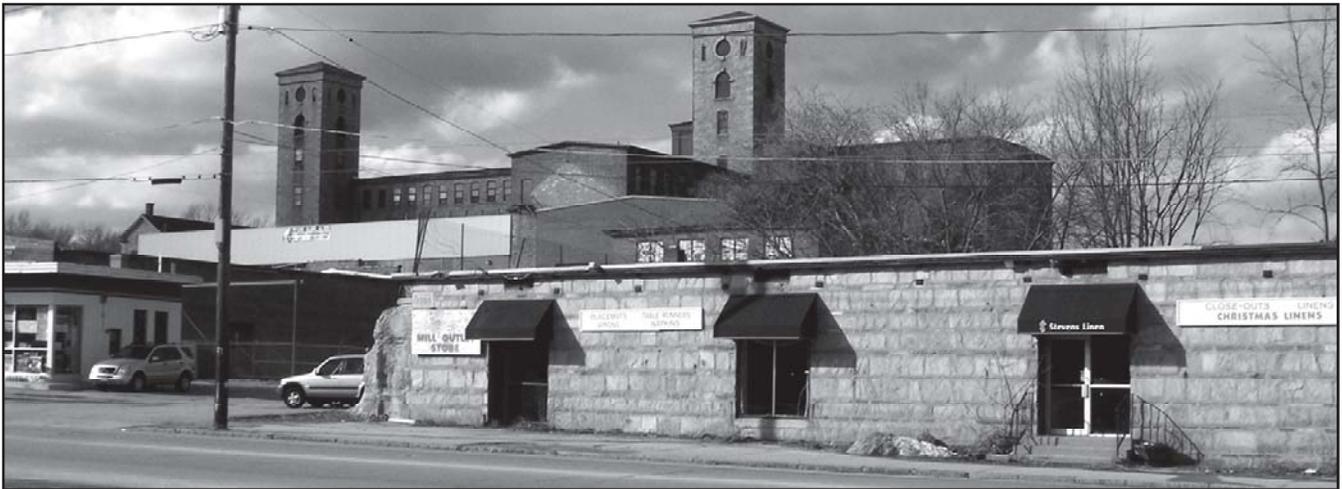
*Former Stevens Linen Works west tower, with “Stevens” and the date “1864” on the side. The main mill is to the left, and the office wing is to the right.*

One of these resources is the former granite mill of Stevens Linen Works. This beautiful building was the third mill erected at the site, the first one being a woolen mill in 1812. On the site of a second mill, mill-owner Henry Hale Stevens erected his monumental, stone mill (1862-65), with its distinctive pair of tall towers. Stevens began manufacturing linen in the old woolen mill in 1846. Using imported machinery and workers, he became the first manufacturer in the U.S. to spin flax and weave linen cloth by machine. Stevens began improving his plant before the Civil War, but the cotton famine during the war encouraged him to undertake a major expansion. Indeed, many people at the time thought that flax or other plant fibers might supplant cotton. But after the war, cotton recovered its place as the main fabric produced in the U.S. Linen never got a foothold here. Many linen mills started up, none survived for long. Stevens Linen was the only long-lived linen mill in the U.S., and it continued in operation until the early 21st century. At the end of the 19th century, the mill began to concentrate on the production of dishtowels, and it continued to make this product fairly exclusively until the 1930s. In 1939, the business became Stevens Linen Associates, and the products made at the plant changed over time. Production finally ceased in 2003.

The mill is remarkably well-preserved. It consists of the original Civil War-era factory, with wings for shops, storage, and offices and its pair of tall towers. Over the years, one wing was extended, and floors were added to the east wheelhouse and the east wing. Other parts of the factory include a Carding and Hackling Mill (1913), East Mill (1927-28), and storehouses. Nothing remains of that old 1812 mill any longer, except for a date-stone and lintel carved with the saying, “ALL WAS OTHERS, ALL WILL BE OTHERS,” now preserved in the yard of the Black Tavern Historical Society.

We visited sections of the main mill and its appendages, and the East Mill; we walked around the north, west, and south sides of the mill site. Then we walked about 1/5 mile, past Low Pond, to Merino Pond, where we saw the remains of the former Bleachery mill and the dam at Merino Pond.

After the site tour, the program continued at the nearby historic Black Tavern in Dudley Center, where the Black Tavern Historical Society provided us a place to gather and refreshments. Sara Costa, niece of the last owner of Stevens Linen Associates, created a display of the fabrics produced by the mill, including photographs and other items connected with the mill. Sara Costa and



*Former Stevens Linen Works seen from West Main Street in Dudley, Mass. In the foreground, right, is the former SLW warehouse, most recently a Stevens Linen Mill outlet store. Behind this, center and left, are the mill, its towers and wings. A modern addition – a loomshed – unfortunately fills the courtyard once created by the mill and its perpendicular wings.*

Michael Branniff, a member of the Dudley Historical Commission, each gave presentations about SLW. Mike spoke about the character and achievements of Henry Hale Stevens and his admiration for the man, who during his career as owner and manager of the mill lived in a house across the street from it. Sara Costa spoke about the Crawford family (to which she is related on her mother’s side), which was long connected with the mill, as employees, managers and owners, and the mill in the 20th century.

On behalf of the SNEC-SIA, I’d like to thank George Peterson, current owner, for giving the SNEC access to the mill, and the Black Tavern Historical Society for its hospitality. Special thanks to Sara Costa and Mike Branniff for their contributions to making the

day informative and enjoyable, and for helping to organize the program. Sara Wermiel organized and led the mill tour, and created a list of sites with a map for an Early Bird Tour.

In June, the Massachusetts Historical Commission voted Stevens Linen Works Historic District eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The nomination was forwarded to the National Park Service in Washington, and it should be officially listed soon. In addition, this coming October, the mill and Hugh W. Crawford, Jr., the last owner of Stevens Linen Works, will be inducted into the American Textile Hall of Fame.

Sara E. Wermiel,  
Program Organizer



*SNEC tourons in front of the SLW Storehouse No. 5. Rumor has it that there are remnants of water turbines in the cellar of this building (brought there when the mill converted to water power) and we tried to get access to them, but did not succeed.*